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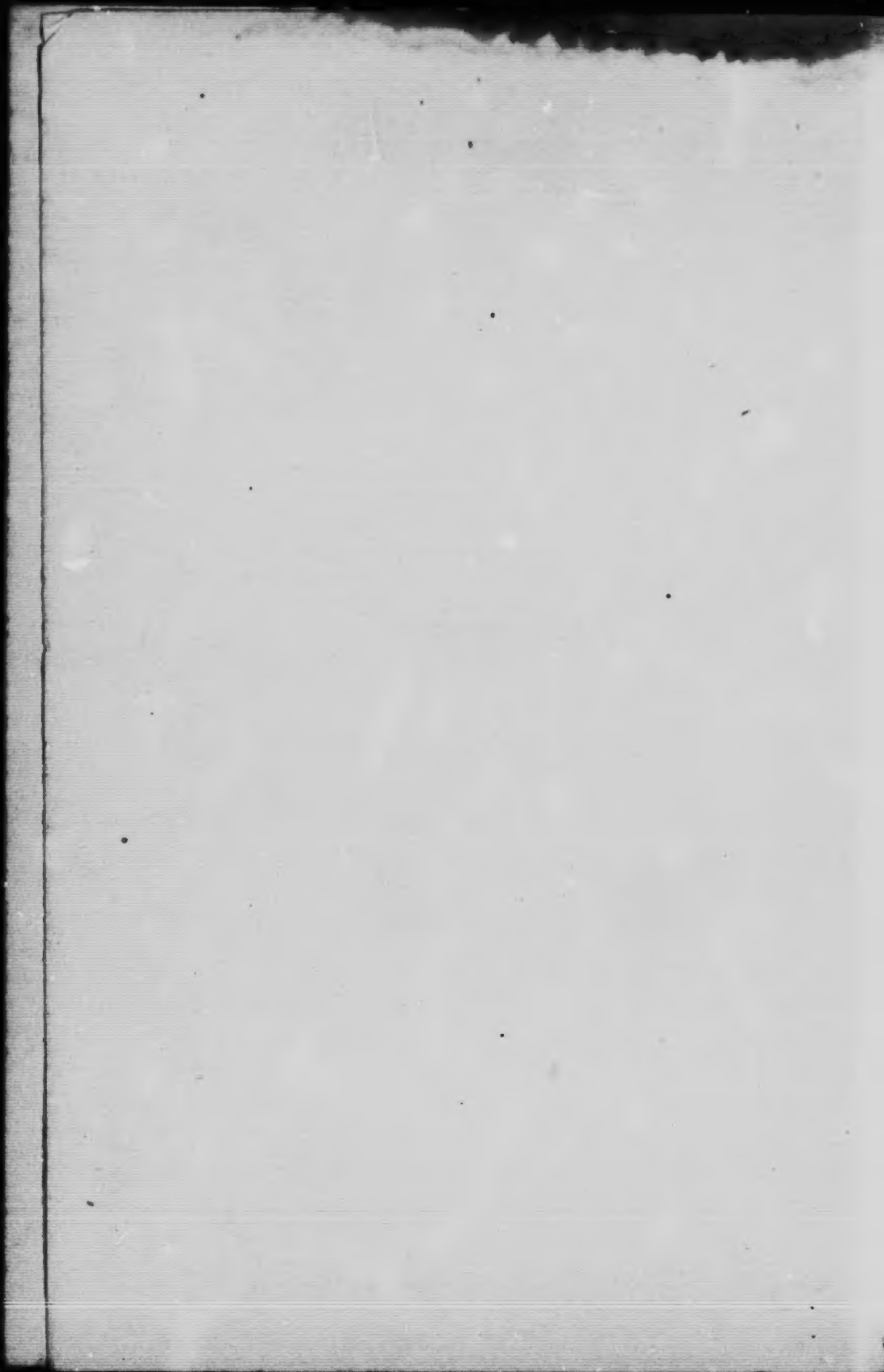
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Inscrip 1910



THE STRAW

The Straw

BY

R. RAMSAY

AUTHOR OF "THE KEY OF THE DOOR"

TORONTO

THE MACMILLAN COMPANY OF
CANADA, LIMITED

PR6035

A46

S77

1909

p**x

WILLIAM BRENDON AND SON, LTD.
PRINTERS, PLYMOUTH
ENGLAND

0 923340

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CHAPTER I

GAY had been out hunting with the Quorn. On the ride home he had fallen into the company of two or three kindred spirits, dare-devil sportsmen, propounding the biggest joke of the season in the confidential dusk. A word or two had been enough to fire him, to make him, rocking in his saddle, throw in his lot with them.

And now the moon was up, a winking, disappearing moon, and the hilarious conspiracy was afoot.

They had dined in Melton with Rafferty, the sapper, who was qualified to draw on a glorious experience of night alarms, and who had ripped the lining out of his dinner-jacket to improvise masks. As he had insisted, they might as well do the thing in style.

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Lord Robert, the instigator, had got rid of his chauffeur, sending him with a cargo of ladies'-maids to the servants' ball at Burrough, and had himself engineered his worst car with all imaginable precaution into the sleeping street. He was a bad driver but full of hope. They had had one or two lucky misses at the turnings, but his erratic steering had been triumphant, and they were at last running silently with hidden lamps along the pale strip of the Leicester Road.

"That villain Burkinshaw," said Lord Robert feelingly, letting her hum. "I'll teach him to snort at a poor devil who's had all his family tin-pots stolen. How could *I* keep out burglars from my ancestral cave in the horrible wilds of Wales?—boasting that only a fool is robbed——! I'd like to see his face to-morrow."

"Still," said Rafferty, "don't spill your confederates in the hedge."

Lord Robert slowed down a bit, peering into the darkness and dipping suddenly off the turnpike into the winding obscurity of a rutted lane. A mile or two passed miraculously without misfortune, and then he ran under the lee of a murmuring spinney and shut off the engine.

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"Come on," he said in a stage whisper, squeezing through the briars to the moss-stained wooden rails that guarded the plantation.

"Wait till I find the tools," said Rafferty, fumbling in the car. "I've provided a jemmy and a rope ladder and a square of brown paper smeared with marmalade—treacle is the professional article, but it wasn't to be had. And I say, you fellows, kindly shuffle your feet when you're planking them in a flower-bed, or you'll have the police tracking us by our boots."

"Reminds me," said Lord Robert, sitting on the top rail, with an air of unnatural prudence. "I'm proposing to pull a pair of socks over mine."

"Oh, come on," said Gay.

He pushed into the tangle of underwood, stumbling over a fox-earth and bursting through the brambles; reaching a dim, but open, stretch of grass on the inner side; and the others followed.

Faintly visible on the right was a fantastic array of gravestones, weather-stained, leaning drunkenly, reminiscent of a time when the massive, ivy-clad house was not simply the hunting quarters of Burkinshaw. In parts it had been

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rudely altered, but in the main it was still an ancient manor, its ruggedness marred by the long French windows now fast shuttered, that had been knocked in the walls on the garden side. Lord Robert went up to these with the gliding tread of a wild Indian and tried the fastenings with an impatient rattle.

"I'll get into this house," he said, "if I have to go down the chimney."

"There's no hurry," said Rafferty, cocking his eye at the leaded diamond panes near the roof. "With the whole staff footing it at this ball at Burrough, and old Burkinshaw snoring in his upper chamber, we can go canny. Anybody staying in the house?"

"Not that I know of," said Lord Robert carelessly. "At least, no men. Stop that young fool cackling! He'll spoil it all."

The youngest of the party, Lord Robert's cousin, subsided, stuffing his handkerchief into his mouth as Gay, who had been stalking possibilities, came back grinning. Sure enough the pantry window was on the latch.

"Magnificent!" said Lord Robert. "I'll have the post of danger. Give me a leg up, will you? What the dickens——! Oh, I say, that's too bad."

He was scrambling up like a cat, and an

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unlucky trail of ivy had torn loose with him, launching him backwards. He collapsed into a bed of wallflowers and sat nursing his knee.

"I've lamed myself," he said lamentably. "Up with you, Gay. Rafferty's too solid. Never mind the spoons, but carry off Lady Sarah. You can't miss her. She hangs in the dining-room."

Gay swung himself to the sill of the unfastened window, and thrusting his arm in, with a wrench and a pull was inside. Treading light he plunged, with an odd mixture of recklessness and caution, into the unknown risks of the dead silent house.

This darkness was close and warm, unlike that outside, and the hush was alive. He caught himself wondering what ghosts were likely to rise up in it and hinder him, and there awoke in him an altogether reprehensible joy in the situation. He felt the exhilaration of the highwayman and the poacher, and his spirit danced, caught up in the spell of lawlessness.

The place was an irregular barrack, rather confusing to a marauder, the kitchen end of it shut off by interminable passages from other regions; but more by luck than knowledge he turned into the right one and lighting a

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candle (Rafferty's providence had included, but smashed, a lantern) at last reached familiar landmarks—the stuffed wild beasts shot in India by Burkinshaw (who might now be lurking in his nightshirt to add him to that collection), and the grinning masks in the hall. Triumphantly ! made his way into the smoking-room and unbarred a window, signalling to the others to stand ready ; and then went hunting for Lady Sarah hanging in unapproachable haughtiness in the dining-room. His light flickered, throwing diabolical gleams across her painted face with its aristocratic grimness and its moustache—Lady Sarah had, in her time, been a witness to wilder work than this—as he hauled the picture down. It was heavier than he imagined, immense in its antique, gilded frame ; but he was undisturbed at his work and lugged it across the hall into the smoking-room, lowering it to his fellow-conspirators down below.

“ I say,” whispered Lord Robert, limping, but bursting with delight. “ Just rummage a bit, will you, before you jump. Give the establishment a decently burgled air.”

“ Right,” said Gay.

He went back into the hall, among the glaring eyes of the tigers. His candle, in-

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cautiously put down in the draught, had been extinguished, but he had his matches. He felt for it, striking flashes.

How villainously the planks creaked ! But for that all was utter stillness. It was half a pity there had been no skirmish, no alarm. . . . His step was careless.

And then he heard a quick breath above him and saw one watcher. The light flaring in his fingers revealed her to him, pale and brave, clasping the balustrade.

The sight of her, startling as it was, fixed him, gazing. She looked so like a ghost and still so real, leaning out of the dark, making it living to him, clad in dim, blue silken stuff ; a young face with a shut but trembling mouth. Gay was bewitched.

Then he realised his own sinister appearance with Rafferty's ridiculous strip of black satin hiding half his face, and that one poor candle casting its weird shadows, painting him a ruffian. In his hurry to reassure this apparition, he forgot utterly to disguise his voice, gentlemanly, apologetic.

"I won't hurt you," he said hastily. "I'm frightfully sorry——"

He saw the desperate bravery in her eyes changing to bewilderment, heard her gasp

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with a woman's illogical impulse, her instinctive siding with a man in danger.

"Oh, you'll be caught," she whispered.

"I'm going; I'm going. You've routed me," said Gay.

He turned; she would probably faint if he stayed to parley. Ye gods, what a villain she took him for!—turned back blindly into the room where the rushing night-air blew in. Perhaps she would think he had just made his way into the house. Anyhow, she saw him go empty-handed.

He listened a minute, lingering unaccountably, delaying his jump. Possibly because he heard a rustle on the stairs, and it made him curious. Possibly because the sight of her had knocked him stupid. Was she actually plucky enough—was she venturing down—alone—to find out if he had gone? Well, she shouldn't think he was tricking her. He set his knee on the window-ledge to spring out and follow the others whom he could just distinguish staggering along, weak with laughter, dragging the picture with them into the spinney.

And then he was arrested, thrilled by the touch of slight fingers on his arm; he heard a girl's voice, low and breathless, too eagerly

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pitiful to know fear of a man of her own rank, who had fallen so.

"I've—*given* you this," she said. "It might help ; you might—oh, I am sorry, I am so sorry——!"

And she was gone like a dream, and he dared not follow, pursue her, explain to her—dared not do anything but swing himself to the grass ; one hand closed mechanically on what she had thrust into it. It was not money. She must have caught up the first trinket she had of any value.

His cheek burned hot in the sharp night air, and he was divided between shame and a kind of warm rapture in this adventure. Without any sense of direction he blundered across the garden, glad of the darkness, landing at last among the rest of them watching for him behind the spinney. They had packed Lady Sarah inside the motor, and Lord Robert had started his engine and was whistling up the laggard.

"Whoop !" he said. "In with you. Why, man, we were planning a rescue. We had no manner of doubt Burkinshaw had nailed you and was sitting on your head."

Gay hurled himself into the car as it started. It was too dark to see without guessing now

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the moon had gone down, and the heavens were black, unpierced by any stars: Lord Robert peered ahead, bent over the driving wheel, running them precariously between the brushing hawthorn hedges, winding nearer and nearer without accident to the less perilous obscurity of the Leicester Road. The wind bit and Rafferty pulled out his flask.

Gay sat with his arm supporting a weight of tarnished gilding, dumb in the midst of their unhallowed exultation. He could not share this thing that had happened to him, neither could he just now whole-heartedly play the fool. And he had not looked at what he held safe and secret—but it felt like a string of pearls.

CHAPTER II

THE invariable east wind was king at the Belvoir meet at Scalford. The trees shivered and the grass had a wizened look.

Horses could not keep still with that sporting nip in the air. They sidled and backed restlessly all up the village street, making the groom's affectionate loitering at the public-houses almost impossible by their cantrips. Miles away the road rang ominously hard with a noise of trotting, varied by the wailing tune of motors. All were late and all were hurrying, ignorant that hounds had only just turned up, slipping in by the stack-yard. The huntsman, ruddy and impervious to the blast, was exchanging tales with the faithful who had not tarried and were warming themselves with gossip. In these bleak five minutes the good stories get a start that carries them over three counties without a check.

A minute ago the field had been almost empty, though a wall sheltered the numbed

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photographer, whose hunting is a chase of celebrities and a wild escaping in and out among their horses' heels. But already the scarlet was sprinkled thicker and lit up the landscape, threatened as it was by fugitive flakes of snow. On a day like this there was no mistaking the pale Londoner huddling near the wall, feeling all this misery dear at three guineas, eyeing his hireling as a treacherous enemy with whom he was unacquainted, and shuddering in his skin. The hardy follower turned out with an extra thickness of flannel under his waistcoat and an invincible complexion fired instead of shrivelled by the wind.

There are men who can hunt with a pack for years and still slink into the field unnoticed, but Gay had no chance of that. He rode in at the gate hailed on all sides as a prodigal, because he had been missed of late. His brown mare picked her way with practised friendliness into the group of squatting hounds, but the huntsman was being cross-examined by an importunate lady, who wished to find out the faults of an animal that had once passed through his hands, and who was not to be contented by his non-committal verdict: "All I can say is, my lady, he's not your

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horse." So Gay turned away and was at once accosted.

"You villain, what do you mean by deserting us?"

"Oh, come," said Gay. "I've been over three weeks in Ireland."

"You were out yesterday with the Quorn."

"I can't be so uncivil as to turn my back on them," said Gay, "when they are at my door."

Lord Robert, posted on a windy hillock that raked all approaches, nodded at him, preternaturally correct, stiff as a poker, the last person one would suspect of original sin.

"Seen anything of Burkinshaw?" he asked. "I'm on the look out for him. There's an astonishing rumour going round Melton, and" lower—"I've let out a hint to one or two fellows. Oh, here's Maria! Done again, it's the parson."

A respectable rider in a dark coat and breeches came into the narrow bit of lane turning town to the field; a figure not at all remarkable till she came closer and you saw that her hair, brushed flat, was tied with a black silk ribbon. It was Mrs. Burkinshaw, whom for no reason, since her name was Elizabeth, the hunting world called Maria.

"She's riding that kicker Somers palmed off

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on them," said Gay. "I wonder he doesn't chuck her off."

"Not he," said Lord Robert, "the weight of her would cow an elephant. I know how Burkinshaw jumped at the innovation of her riding on a cross saddle. 'Perfectly proper!' said he, considering the sore backs in his stables. It isn't the flighty ones take to it; it's the ones with sensible husbands who pay the piper."

"Well," said a man at his elbow, "it must be more amusing to feel a horse between your knees than to be hooked on to him as if he was a clothes-peg."

Lord Robert, keeping his watch on the gate, took off his hat to the lady.

"Somebody," he remarked, "asked me the other day why the deuce she wore that black bow. Said it was positively indecent to go about advertising your sex like that."

"Oh, she doesn't wear it for that reason," said Gay. "Don't you know Chop, the parson? You can't tell the two apart without it. We are never quite clear which of them sports it, all we know is it's to distinguish them from each other."

"And the day before yesterday a farmer picked it up," said Rafferty, striking in, "and

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galloped after Chop most obligingly, and said : ' Beg pardon, you've dropped your bow, sir.' Thought it some ritualistic adornment. We left the parson thanking him out of the Commination Service, but none of us said Amen."

" Who is the girl ? " said Gay ; " the girl coming with Maria ? "

She had had some difficulty in making her horse follow the other down. It was fresh and skittish, pretending to be scared by the flapping hood of a motor. So she rode in by herself, holding her whip and reins carefully, but betraying in her look of relief at having controlled the creature, that she was not quite at home in the saddle. Two or three people smiled at her and she smiled too, deliciously, colouring a little. Something pinned Gay's attention to her the moment she came in sight.

" She's the girl I am going to marry," said Lord Robert promptly, " when I have dis-
posed of the other six. How is it that most of our beauties go out like a candle when you put them under a riding-hat ? "

" I've heard," said the man next him, " that she is an heiress that Maria—who can't see two impossible people without shaking them up

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together—is throwing to the lions. They say she has mints of money, and Maria has booked her to set Bill Lauder on his legs.”

Lord Robert whistled.

“Lauder, of all men!” he remarked. “If that’s it there’ll be the devil to pay when Sophia Bland comes back with a divorce in her pocket. She won’t let him go without a struggle.”

The other man laughed.

“Maria believes in the distribution of wealth,” he said. “Thinks herself kind-hearted. There’ll be a pretty fight.”

“Here’s Burkinshaw,” said Lord Robert, pricking up, as, with a face of hypocritical sympathy, he bore down upon the victim, whose arrival was made known by a circulating grin.

Gay kept aloof. He durst not make one of the audience collecting to enjoy Burkinshaw’s furious recital. It wasn’t guilt, it was a kind of shyness with which nobody, least of all himself, would have charged the devil-may-care, impecunious Gay, who was one of Maria’s failures, having flatly refused to buy prosperity at the hands of a woman, and who had lately come back the same cheerful pauper (after spending two or three unprofitable years in

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those parts of America that bloodthirsty writers pick out on the map to locate their shooting stories) to an inheritance worth little, and a neighbourhood that had missed him sadly.

He stayed on the outskirts of the congregation, disregarding Rafferty's invitation to push in and hear the fun, and pretending to humour his mare who, not being coddled in a box reeking of ammonia and as hot as an oven, was behaving in the bitter wind with the patience of an unshorn lamb.

"And," concluded Burkinshaw solemnly, in his loud bass voice, that even in calamity sounded boastful, "the rascals were no raw hands, confound them. They appear to have been disturbed at their work."

Gay looked over their heads at the girl then ; he could not help it. His heart leapt and then dropped unaccountably, because her eyes were cast down.

"But," said the pompous victim, "they got away with a valuable historical painting—the portrait of Lady Sarah."

"Shocking!" said Lord Robert. "Look here, Rafferty and I want you to dine with us to-night, in Melton. It will be handy for you to pop up and down communicating with the police. And we'll do what we can to console

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you. Hounds moving off, are they? Mind you come. It's a bit of a secret, but some of us are getting up a kind of a presentation."

He shortened his reins and dropped his profoundly sympathetic tone for a moment.

"You treat your ancestors most disrespectfully, do you know?" he fired over his shoulder. "The back of her's thick with cobwebs."

Squeezing through the gate he was cut off by the press of riders closing in on all sides, clattering through the village, praying all for a stout fox in Melton Spinney and no dismal halt at the bleak top corner, huddling near the inadequate shelter of that one bit of untrimmed hedge.

And the hunting gods were kind. Before the tail of the long procession had passed the farm on the rise, there was a cry at the cover, a noise of thudding hoofs—the imprudent charging down to the brook, too hasty to pause and listen before splashing through the ford, and deceived by that old trick of the spinney foxes who, making a false start, begin their real journey in the opposite direction to that in which their prelude has misguided half the pursuit.

This one had let himself be seen dashing out at the bottom to within a yard of the brook,

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had turned when all eyes were gazing to track his line beyond, zigzagged rapidly, and darting in again had spun up the ride in the middle of the cover and shot out across the road on the top, now deserted. It must have been music to him to hear the galloping hundreds thundering down to the bottom on either side. But a whip, lurking on the watch, called the hounds on to him and they took up his line, and flashed right through, over the road, skimming the plough like birds, turning right-handed and swooping over the further hillside fringed by its line of ragged thorn-trees.

The field, circling round the spinney, gathered again and came after like an army, keeping down the turf and cramming into the heavy bit of lane in the dip that excused three fences. Climbing the hill they scattered, suddenly hidden in whirling snow.

For two or three minutes the squall that had caught them darkened the earth. Hounds were inaudible, invisible to the brave who, winking fast, by instinct kept blindly on. And then magically it cleared and Freeby Wood loomed in the distance, black beyond the glistening stretches of grey-green grass.

"Hallelujah!" shouted Gay, pulling out his

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handkerchief and wiping his eyes as he galloped. "There they are. And running——!"

Lord Robert shot past him, rubbing his face on his sleeve.

"That was a stinger," he said. "Ah, there's that rail. It's turned me over before. If Paddy remembers it as well as I do he'll be careful. If not, it means another doctor's bill."

He crashed sublimely into the rail he mentioned, but it splintered harmlessly as he and his chestnut vanished, a vision of flying heels; and the next man veered from his own line to take advantage of the sudden gap. Gay had shown the way over without a touch; he was worse to follow.

The run was turning into a steeplechase, so breathless was it, with hounds scouring faster and faster on to a screaming scent, and the east wind flinging back their cry in the teeth of pursuit. It was not a time to diverge toward gates, nor even for glancing right and left in search of the easy places each man carried in his head; it was just up and over. If your horse couldn't take a fence clean and pecked on landing, you made it up between this mistake and the next, mindful to keep a grip on the reins if you found yourself in the

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ditch—and you hadn't time to think of breaking a collarbone. For the fox had been driven straight through the wood, and was keeping to that good line that means death or Coston Cover. He flashed over the hillside like a streak of lightning, ran down into the valley, put the brook between him and his pursuers, and slackening as he climbed the big pastures on the slope, was run into within two or three fields of triumph.

There were not many in it, and there had been great grief behind. Thirty minutes at that pace had weeded out all but the stoutest, had sprinkled the fields with stragglers.

Gay, who had been down twice, but for all that had struggled up, slid out of his saddle, and after looking his mare over, felt himself. His coat was slit up the back and his hat was a concertina.

"What a day!" he said.

"Splendid," chimed in another man, who was stanching a smarting scratch, and puffing like a grampus. "But it's all very fine riding on the top of the ground like this. Mud is more agreeable to the ribs."

Lord Robert was scanning the horizon for his second horse, having much too wisely ordered his man to hang about down-wind.

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"Awful thing superstition," he grumbled. "I'm sure the foxes delight in running bang against it. What do they care in their hearts which way the wind is? They're skimming close to the ground themselves; it's *we* who get all the battering in a gale. I wish I could find a man with the wit to disobey my orders. I can't ride this brute another yard."

A dealer who had come out to give an unknown quantity his first sight of hounds, and had wonderfully survived, drew his prodigy alongside Lord Robert's washy chestnut.

"Care to try him, my lord?" he suggested blandly. The young 'un flung up his head snorting. His eye was wild and his neck was white with lather.

"Thanks; I haven't the nerves to ride a steam engine," said Lord Robert. "There's another squall coming up."

"It looks to me," said his neighbour, "as if there are enough loose horses in our tracks already to start a circus."

"And one's a side-saddle," said Gay, deserting the happy band falling in behind the huntsman. He knew the beast; he had ridden him himself, and sold him to Burkinshaw. And he felt as if Fate had sent him careering riderless to his hand. He began his search with a

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curious sense of its inevitableness. Oddly enough he was not thinking much that she might be hurt. Fortune had sent him this opportunity, and in one breath he was assuring himself that she could not possibly recognise him as last night's ruffian, and, on the other hand, that now he had his chance to explain.

There was a fall in the wind, or rather he did not feel it, since it was behind him, riving him instead of buffeting in his face. How quickly the riotous life had left the trampled pastures over which they had galloped ! They lay below him like empty wastes. Here and there the disturbed cattle were herding in the corners, panting after a stampede ; and the sheep were still running all together. There was no guessing how far her horse might have followed unstayed, nor how far from him she might be lying crumpled under a hedge.

Gay pushed on faster, burst through a gap with his two horses and nearly let out a shout when at last he saw her.

She was gallantly trudging through the bents and rushes that hid the uneven bottom, her torn habit over her arm, her hat gone, her head flung back, courageous.

The Samaritan cantered down to her, wanting no introduction.

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"Your horse, I think," he said, as simply as he could, face to face with her in the daylight.

"How kind of you," she said. "I am lost."

Gay looked from the darkening heavens to the wind-swept country that was a desert round them, blessing the hill that shut away the survivors of the run, making for Waltham Thorns.

"Burkinshaw had no business to put you on this clumsy brute," he said. "I'll talk to Maria. He isn't a lady's horse."

She started at his voice, looking at him earnestly, slightly catching her breath as she spoke to him again. He was stooping to put her up in the saddle.

"Oh, it wasn't the horse's fault," she said. "I rode him badly. I was frightened."

"Frightened?" said Gay. The word jumped out of him. "Frightened? *You?*"

His exclamation betrayed him to her; he was sure of it, wondering what would happen. For one moment both were silent, and then a blizzard was upon them and the air was thick with snow that obliterated trees and sky and the hill and the world itself.

"There's a haystack this way," said Gay, half smothered; "and a hovel."

They scampered frantically towards it, in-

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distinct as it was. The hovel was low and dark and they could not ride into it without dismounting, but at least it was a refuge from the blinding storm. With his head bent Gay dashed out into the turmoil, pulling an armful of hay from the stack to stuff into the rude manger, for his fellow-fugitive to sit on, and then stood with the horses, outwardly quiet, staring into the whirl.

"There's blood on your cheek," she said.

Was her voice for him always to hold compassion? He turned his head, still wondering at himself and how it took hold of him.

"It's nothing," he said. "Like a good many others I took a toss. . . . I should like to ask you . . . do you know who I am?"

"I knew when you spoke," she said.

"And you are not nervous?" said Gay. "Taking shelter like this in a robber's cave?"

"Not now," she said. "I—I am beginning to understand."

"Are you thinking of bribing the criminal to emigrate and lead an honest life in a foreign land?" said Gay. The murder was out, and he felt extraordinarily lighthearted.

"Ah, don't laugh at me," she said. He thought her voice shook a little as if at a recollection.

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"Laugh at me," he cried hotly. "I'd sooner——" and controlled himself. "Then you have guessed that the lot of us were taking a rise out of Burkinshaw? You heard them at the meet? You are not astonished——"

"That you look so respectable," she said gravely.

Conscious of his damaged condition he bowed as gravely, but his eyes twinkled.

"Heaven be thanked!" he said. "I was obliged to bolt, letting you think the worst. Tell me who you are. I have to restore your charitable benefaction."

"I am Judy Stewart," she said; "the Burkinshaws are my cousins."

"You're not——" he exclaimed, stopping himself in time.

When was it that Maria, raiding his house out of pure curiosity and finding it upside down, finding also three cattle-dealers drinking whisky in the dining-room, and mistaking them for bailiffs in possession, had generously offered to marry him to her husband's cousin? A good girl, she had said, but harmless, with a gun factory in the background. It was not so long ago that he could not recall his own lordly scorn.

"Yes," she said; "I am that wandering

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shuttlecock. I've no real relations; nobody to scold me. That is why I do silly things." Faltering, almost beseeching, as if troubled by a vision of ridicule, she finished: "You won't tell?"

"It's our secret," said Gay.

She didn't know—how could she?—that Maria had been putting her up to the lowest bidder; that Maria, in her moonstruck philanthropy, was offering her to her needy friends. And so she had nobody on her side, no relations to scold her and keep her safe? A great longing to shield her seized him, himself impossible, miserably poor. She looked so young, so full of a dangerous confidence that had never known treachery or unkindness.

"You shouldn't do things like that," he said, following his confused and angry thoughts. "We're not worth pity. We're not worth helping. None of us. We're brutes. Some day you'll hurt yourself."

The girl was startled by his irrelevant fierceness, but instinct helped her to answer lightly.

"Do you mean," she said, "that if you had been a real burglar you would have murdered me?"

"Of course I mean that," he said, dropping into mock seriousness. "A reasonable creature

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would have ducked her head under a pillow and screamed for help."

Through his banter vibrated an undertone of worship; dimly she felt it, knowing that in his soul this man was not laughing at her, but not faintly guessing what thoughts were his. The wind whistled through the chinks in the clay walls and made her shiver; the horses were stirring in thin-skinned restlessness, rubbing their heads as if in excuse against the man. Their eyes shone in the semi-darkness, luminous and kind.

Judy liked Leicestershire, liked the quick intimacy that sprang up among kindred spirits, the friendships that followed the accidents of a day without the suspicious paving of an acquaintance; all foolishness when you saw at a glance what a man was made of, when his risks were yours and you lent each other unquestioning a helping hand; when you could read him for yourself in a minute. She liked the men. They were so real, so regardless of the world's opinions and, like all sportsmen, the hardest veterans, always young.

If there seemed to her sometimes something wrong about the women, a rivalry, a hardness, the fancy passed over her head. After all, saints and sinners, they were good to her. . . .

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And now, sitting on a bundle of hay in this dark mud hovel, being taken care of by a man with whom comradeship had begun so strangely, and who stood guarding the entrance in his tattered scarlet coat, like a soldier defending her from the blast, she was happy—and not surprised. Idly she wondered what her cousin had in her mind when she had pointed him out at the meet, with a sniff that was half impatient and half indulgent.

"That's Jimmy Gay," she had said. "A dear, but impracticable. Quite impracticable. I've washed my hands of him."

But he was the hero—or should she not say the villain?—of Judy's one adventure.

"I'll send your pearls by registered post," he said. "Commonplace, but safer than keeping them in my pocket till I find a chance of handing them to you. Though I live within a stone's-throw. I can watch your windows twinkling from my own. Poor old Burkinshaw will get his ancestor back all right; we are bad, but we are comparatively honest; we don't pawn our booty. You know why he makes a fetish of Lady Sarah?"

"No," she said. The squall was passing; already the world that had been blotted out was less invisible, whirling still.

THE STRAW

"Well, she was a gay old party in the century she lived in, and owing to faults of her own got into history. Burkinshaw's father swore by her as a tutelary deity, and carted her about with his family from place to place till they settled in Leicestershire, and some self-made person he wouldn't notice hired a man to write a book on county families, and show her up in all her original wickedness. It was a horrid shock to her pious descendants. But they had the last word."

"How?" she said, falling into his mood. His smile was contagious.

"Burkinshaw's parent posted off to a literary nephew he had disowned, and as the price of forgiveness got him to write a novel with plenty of local colour—and a murder that was committed in the enemy's Elizabethan mansion. There was an awful row when pilgrims began to haunt it, snapshotting at large, and plaguing the inhabitants to let them gloat over spots of blood. The thing got on their nerves, and they gave up and departed to Devonshire, leaving the Burkinshaws triumphant on the field of battle."

As he talked he was looking to the horses' girths, tightening her curb chain a link or two, examining her saddle.

THE STRAW

"It's fine now," he said at last. "Shall we start out and find them? They couldn't run a yard in that; we shall catch them hanging round the Thorns pitying themselves."

"I would rather find my way home," she said, standing up. "I am awfully stiff, and I have lost my hat."

"Tie a handkerchief over your head," said Gay promptly. "Oh, mine is bigger than that. Will you have it? I'll get your hat if it hasn't blown into Lincolnshire. Are you stiff, really? Too stiff to ride?"

He stood considering her as she failed ignominiously in her effort to spring into the saddle, smiling rather piteously up at him, bruised by her tumble. And then he moved out into the field brandishing the red silk handkerchief he had shaken out to put on her head. The storm had passed as quickly as it came up, and although the wind rioted there was not one white feather in the air. Away on the right they heard a trotting of many horses and near at hand, like an echo, the solitary pattering of one.

"That is Tokenhouse," said Gay, pointing to a huge umbrella travelling on the other side of the hedge. "My lodger. He has a knack of turning up when he is wanted. He'll

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take you home safe and sound, and I'll put your horse in here and tell Maria's second horseman where he is. Do you want a pin for your habit? I've got a fine one I was intending to stick in my back."

He buckled the reins hastily, with the help of a rusty cow-chain, round the post that kept up the sinking roof of the hovel, and walked over to the hedge.

The girl's misfortunes had stiffened her gait into a pathetic hobble, but she reached him in time to hear him explaining the situation to a man in a gig who, when she looked at him closely, was much younger than she expected; a lean, clean-shaven, quiet man, who had a worsted comforter twisted round his neck. He glanced at her, a slight interest quickening his curiously tired expression.

"Lord Tokenhouse will take care of you," said Gay. "Shut up your old umbrella, Tokenhouse, and make room for her. There is no gate convenient, so if you don't mind, I'll drop you over."

With gentle unceremoniousness he swung her over the barrier of thorns and then, getting on to his horse, flicked over the hedge himself.

"And now," he said, "I'll go on and harrow

THE STRAW

Maria's feelings. What fearful thing shall I say has become of you ? ”

Out of nowhere a brown horse came crashing into the lane, sending bits of turf flying as he was spurred along, pulled on his haunches just in time to avoid cannoning into them.

“ Where are hounds ? ” called his rider. “ I’ve been hunting them high and low. Just because I was late—— ! I hear they have had a run.”

He made an imposing figure, curbing his chafing beast, his mouth dark with vexation ; a handsome, ill-tempered man. As he spoke, he caught sight of the girl and saluted her.

“ Anything wrong ? ” he said. His tone was imperious ; he surveyed her with a displeasure akin to the jealousy of possession.

She answered him with the apologetic hurry a girl might use towards a man who had, perhaps unacknowledged, rights.

“ I have had a spill,” she said. “ I was stupid.”

“ And she has had enough of it,” said the man Gay had introduced as his lodger, cutting off explanations. “ I am taking her home. Keep it up, Lauder ; you’ll find them a hundred miles further on.”

He turned half round to watch the other

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man, contemplating him with a curious crooked smile until he was out of sight.

"So you know Bill Lauder?" he said.

The girl coloured. Two men were looking at her. . . .

"Yes," she said.

Tokenhouse stooped, tucking the shabby bearskin carefully round her. Then he drew the reins through his fingers, nodding at Gay.

"Hounds are creeping miserably at this side of Stonesby Ashes," he said. "You'll be into them round the corner. They can do nothing with this fox. You people always scoff at me when I tell you scent depends on the foxes and not the weather. Off with you! I'll take care of her."

CHAPTER III

JUDY came down the stair.

Always, as now, she laid her hand on the rail with a funny faintness, imagining, living in that adventure; lifted it to the pearls at her neck and smiled a little smile, all to herself.

There were several men in the hall below, standing about the big fire, talking loudly. She saw their faces beneath as she paused far above them, and their gossip came up to her. It was for the most part jargon, but mixed occasionally with names that were known to her. There had been a wind-frost last night, sharp enough to make men chary of risking their best horses, and everybody had left off early.

"Anybody seen Lauder?" Burkinshaw was inquiring, stirring his tea and dropping in lump after lump while his wife's back was turned and he could seize on sugar instead of his allotted globule of saccharin.

THE STRAW

"No. He wasn't out. I heard he had run up to London," said someone else, and a third struck in.

"He didn't. He was going out with the Belvoir; said he was sure they'd manage a gallop in the Vale."

"If ever a man was desperate," said the first, "he looks it. Ruin staring him in the face at every turn. He must have gone all to smash."

"It was his own fault," said Burkinshaw magisterially. "Gambling and racing, and——"

The man laughed.

"Lucky for you, Burkinshaw, that Lauder wasn't in that affair the other night. He'd have helped himself to something more useful than your great-great-grand-aunt. He's in a mood to stick at nothing."

Burkinshaw ignored the ribald remark. He was still in a condition of elephantine uncertainty whether to roar with the community at the joke, or to rage at its perpetrators. His mind rocked between the two.

"After all," said the first man, "it's horrible to go under. And Lauder isn't the kind of man—he can't pull himself together. No ballast, nothing to keep him straight. He's

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more than likely to end it, one way or another, across a fence."

"Sh!" said Maria.

They started guiltily at the emphasis of her interposition, and were dumb, but the fancy crossed at least one man's mind that she might have hissed at them sooner—if she had really wanted to shut them up. As it was her whisper lent to what they had said importance.

"W' 'lady, white lady," said Burkinshaw facetiously, staring upwards, "come down to your tea."

"You have got it wrong," said Maria. "In the rhyme she was a green lady, and she turned into a serpent and ate up the servant as well as the bread and butter."

"Then," said Burkinshaw stoutly, "nobody will insinuate that that version is more suitable than mine."

Judy came down to them, more like a pale princess than any serpent. The heiress had no terrors for these men, married veterans who saw in her only a young thing in Maria's clutches, to be pitied and encouraged, but with no thought of rescue. All of them had a wholesome respect for Maria, who had a man's knowledge of outdoor things, but whose

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terrible firmness inspired alarm in anybody it struck her she ought to settle in life.

Burkinshaw himself had been heard to thank heaven that he was married to her ; his only security against being polished off in his turn. And there was a profane tale that Maria had once been caught shaking her head disconsolately over some suitable importation, explaining that had things been otherwise the lady would have done excellently for Dicky.

Experience had taught the onlookers to keep to their own province. They felt kindly towards the subject of Maria's generalship, but with no more idea of interrupting her march than that of an immutable Providence. If this girl were the straw destined to save Bill Lauder ; if Lauder should clutch at her like a drowning man ; and if Maria had made this salvage her business, it was not theirs.

"So Tokenhouse picked you up the other day and took you home in his chariot," said a man who had put a seat for her in the hottest corner, and was keeping the fire off her cheek with a sporting paper (to which his eye wandered in conversation). "How do you like him ?"

"I like him very much," said Judy ; "but isn't he rather odd ?"

THE STRAW

"Odd? I should think so. That man was the finest steeplechase rider in England. There was no one to touch him across the sticks——"

"Poor Tokenhouse!" said Maria.

"—Till one day he was riding in a match with Bill Lauder and a few other fellows; they had a lot on it and they were all mad to win, going like blazes, and they got mixed up at one of the jumps; there were five of them in a heap, and Tokenhouse underneath. He ought to have been killed, but he wasn't."

"I can see it now," interrupted another man. "Two of them down and the others spinning up to the fence one by one—nothing on earth could stop 'em—coming over crash on the top."

"Tokenhouse hasn't been on a horse since," said the man who was telling Judy. "His nerve is gone. He was the first down, and if the rest of them had been professionals instead of crack-brained lunatics, they'd have been warned off. Poor old Tokenhouse! He lives with Gay and saunters among us like his own ghost in the hunting season. They say he has a screw loose; that his one amusement is writing sermons on the wickedness of the Turf."

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"All I know is," said another, "he's the most extraordinary chap with horses. Understands them. Chucks away his cigarette at a stable door."

"He is a kind of confidential adviser to all the men he knows," said the first man who had spoken. "Sort of mild-mannered, quiet man to whom you can trust your secrets. And two years ago he was one of the most reckless customers under the sun. They tell stories of Tokenhouse——!"

He dropped the subject for want of words, and looking over Judy's head at the window, gave an astonished whistle, and ceased fanning the fire industriously under the impression that he was shielding her.

"Here is Bill Lauder himself," he said. "He looks as if he has had a hard day. This isn't his way home surely?"

Maria glanced suddenly at her husband.

"If any of you are going to give me your opinion about the bay, come along," said Burkinshaw, like a lamb. "I'm inclined to have him fired. It's near the end of the season."

Blindly grasping the signal that they were not wanted, he shepherded them out, sweeping the latest arrival with them, his mistake. The cheerful masculine voices became distant,

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and died away towards the stables. . . . And then all at once Judy sprang up, with a sense of Fate close upon her.

"You heard what they said, didn't you? It's in your hands. Be a little kind to him, Judy," said Maria; and then was not.

And still the girl did not run away.

Lauder came into the house alone, a splendid figure in splashed scarlet, bearing himself with a defiant swagger and all the signs of having ridden hard; perhaps dangerously, perhaps trying—how had they put it?—to end it across a fence. The fire, more potent than the fading light without, glistened in his eyes as in the glass eyeballs of the tigers lurking in the dim recesses of the hall, the familiar trophies terrible to strangers. He looked too big, too magnificent as a man, to rock on the brink of ruin.

The girl's heart was beating with an excitement that was half frightened, half fascination. It had flattered her to watch his recklessness in the field, to hear, while she caught her breath and admired, Maria's cunning whisper. For Maria had been indefatigable, fanning an inclination to worship daring, dazzling her fish before landing her with the fatal net of compassion.

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"I want to ask you something," said Lauder hoarsely.

"Yes . . ." she murmured faintly, turning away her head because she could not bear the desperate look she must meet . . . it made her shiver. And she was young; there had not been any man yet to ask her what she knew this man would.

Lauder came nearer still.

This thing was so important that his heavy pride was broken, its urgency washed away in the tide of necessity his air of overriding obstacles, of crashing mightily into Fate. He paled under his tan and stammered. Maria had not lied; the girl had his life in her hands.

There was no love in his eyes, no passion, and he did not know how to simulate either; hard-driven, betraying only his desperate need of her. He was catching at a straw.

It touched her. Pity had always moved Judy first of all emotions; she who had wanted for nothing, who had found kindness where she looked for it, perhaps not quite knowing how little she claimed, and who had danced up to womanhood without having to learn in bitterness to battle for herself. And she had no vanity to accuse him. Just be-

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cause his want of passion awakened no woman's instinct, it gave her no warning in the shuddering anger that springs to life against it, guarding a woman's breast. Lauder was not a lover, he was a man in dire necessity asking for her help. The sight of his hand unsteady made her heart weak like water.

"Will you marry me?" he said.

She put out her hands to him without a word.

He did not kiss her. Instead he gripped the fingers that lay in his and took a hard breath as if he had indeed ended it—one way or another—across a fence.

"I'm not worth it," he said, in a rough voice that broke and was almost humble; but did not loose her hands.

CHAPTER IV

IT was said of Gay that on coming into his family obligations he had blankly decided to emigrate and then, struck by an inspiration, had walked out of his front door and walked in again at the back, proclaiming that he was now landed in a desert island without running to the extravagance of a voyage, and was emancipated from the chains of convention. Symbolically he had wrenched off his knocker, and used it in some extraordinary agricultural experiment when the blacksmith asked for a bit of iron.

His house was an old one, keeping the tumble-down remains of a former grandeur, and stood midway between Ashby Pastures and another famous cover. Originally it had its back to the west, but Gay's grandfather had picked up the massive flight of steps that descended from the great door and putting them down on the other side of the house had knocked a hole in the wall, and now the

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stranger walked straight up into the house from the road. Explaining his alteration, he had said that Leicestershire houses had no manners, and he did not like their rude habit of turning their backs on the passers-by.

In his odd moments Gay farmed more or less vigorously. It was a scriptural amusement that in no way interfered with the business of his life, which was hunting; and his luck was a miracle to the many who tried to combine the two; retired soldiers and younger sons with faith in their capacity and a little money to lose in keeping unprofitable horses and, theoretically, profitable cows. This morning he had ridden round his fields shepherding in desert-island fashion.

With the Cottesmore at Wild's Lodge at twelve he was in no hurry, but scanned the clouds and the dull sky cheerfully, as he inspected his flocks and herds in a ragged old coat that smelt of tar. On the right of him hung the Pastures, on his left, across a bit of fine jumping country, where the winter afternoons saw many a frantic scurry backwards and forwards, a darker patch. And the same road that passed his house twisted and turned until it reached that of Burkinshaw.

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Standing in his stirrups Gay could see it, not half the distance across the fields, sunk in a hollow, its chimneys rising to fix a man's wandering gaze.

He came in and dressed himself with remarkable care.

"What are you riding?" said Tokenhouse.

Gay pulled off his tie and began to fold another carefully round his neck. It would not lie smooth.

"Fanny," he said. "The one I'm qualifying for Burton. It rained last night; the bone is out of the ground. And then the brown I brought back from Ireland."

"Staying out all day?" said Tokenhouse.

"I suppose so," said Gay, and then glanced up, still worrying with his clothes. "There's a motor passing. Beastly things. . . . In the old days you jogged to the meet with your neighbours—now the neighbours whizz up behind you and run you down."

"And the girl you want to ride with flashes past inaccessible, shut up in a glass case. It's as bad as witchcraft," said Tokenhouse with a gently ironic smile. "But there's always the ride home."

"Yes," said Gay, "there's always the ride home."

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He looked ten years younger robbed of his air of peaceable confidence, reddening, wistful, and, alas, in earnest.

"Poor devil!" said Tokenhouse.

The Saturday crowd was alarming. Gay could hardly make his way through the struggling tides at the cross-roads. On all sides arrivals were whirring up, and the grooms were hanging on to their horses. The whole world seemed to be emptying itself into that one field, lured by the promise of the dull heavens, unsmiling overhead. It was a sight to shake any Master and set him devising plans. A day among the Flats with this huge following meant a day worse than wasted; foxes headed, hounds overridden, no chance of handling them or snatching a decent run. Well, it must be endured unless——! His eye grew meditative as he sat on his horse, sucking his big cigar.

In and out of the press Gay drifted on his paragon, the slim, elastic mare, who was out to show herself and was to be sent home before she was tired in case she acquired the hunter's wise habit, fatal to swiftness, of looking at her fences. He was searching with an eagerness still strange to himself, among all

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these familiar faces, a blank till the one face shone.

"What's the matter?" said Lord Robert, approaching on a borrowed steed. "What means this haughty and far-away demeanour? Behold me mounted on charity, which we all know is broken-kneed. Hullo, Rafferty, has your horse settled down yet? His back was very round when we started."

"Horrible brute!" said Rafferty. "I'll let you have him for a hundred."

Lord Robert ignored the offer.

"Here," he said, "comes Maria, looking awfully respectable in her breeches. More than usual. What is there about her to-day—a moral atmosphere—that makes you think of a bishop performing ceremonies?"

Gay was off like a shot.

"Oho!" said Lord Robert, and prodded the man in front of him with his whip. "Stand out of the light, there's a good fellow; those tops of yours make me feel bilious."

The man, an old enemy, pulled round and glared; out of conceit with his yellow tops.

Gay reached his goal, where Burkinshaw, whose first idea on arriving in the field was to find a warm corner to stand about in, had taken up his position with his back to the wind.

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Maria, promulgating views, was in the thick of the crowd ; but the young cousin was keeping as close to Burkinshaw's substantial form as he, on a fidgety cob, would let her. Gay was close to her before she saw him, and when she looked up and found him at her side, her smile was shy.

Something had happened to check her bubbling friendliness, to shut that mouth that was made for laughter. An odd comparison came into his head. Some time last summer he had stumbled on a procession, headed by a patriotic schoolmistress, of empire-ridden children, their little heads full of incomprehensible instruction, their little legs faithfully trotting in the dust. And Judy's face was, in its young seriousness, like that of the little one who had been chosen to carry the flag.

The absurd recollection would not leave him ; he felt a sudden, curious tenderness. He had caught up that child, so proud, and tired, and anxious, tottering under an honour too heavy, and lifting it flag and all to his shoulder, had, to the great scandal of the schoolmistress, marched on with the procession. And 'he wanted to do that now. . . . He did not know what thing had come to her . . . but he felt the flag was too heavy.

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So he tried to amuse her, wondering, while the crowd grew thicker.

"You know everybody, don't you?" he said. "All the lawless lot who come here and swamp us, getting us a bad character; we're a frightfully mixed assembly. But that's a woman—look at her well—with the greatest moral courage of anybody I know. She's the Countess of Brockton. Do you know what she did?"

"No," said Judy, gazing at her. She was principally noticeable for a certain primness.

"You should," said Gay. "She was travelling with her daughter Constance, a well-brought-up girl, most proper and very helpless, and a friend of hers—and by some terrible mistake a party of trippers were shoved, at the last minute, into their carriage; very noisy and rather—pleasant. One of them had a bottle of whisky—he was half-gone already—and began pressing it on the girls. Of course, they refused with horror——"

"Of course," said Judy.

"Lady Brockton poked her daughter and whispered, 'Drink!' But Constance just sat and stared with her eyes round with terror. So then the monster turned to Lady Brockton, leering and holding out his bottle. 'Just a

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little nip, lady ! ' he said, winking at the rest, and pulled out the cork——"

"How awful !" said Judy, shuddering a little.

"She was equal to it," said Gay. "'Thank you so much,' said she, and accepted the whisky bottle."

"And hurled it out of the window ?" said Judy, looking with admiration at the heroine.

"Tilted it up," said Gay, "and finished it, every drop."

"*Drank* it ?" said Judy, gasping.

"She did. The girls nearly fainted. And as for the trippers they were struck dumb with admiration. They simply gazed at her speechless till the train ran into a station. And then Lady Brockton got down with a great deal of dignity, and muttered to Constance to hold her hand. She couldn't walk straight."

"But——" said Judy, struggling with her ideas.

"She grasped the position, you see," said Gay. "She saw if the whisky was left, the men would drink it themselves and it would make them drunker still—and if she broke the bottle they'd be furious with her—and she thought they might all be murdered, to say nothing of the bad language, before she could stop the

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train. Brave of her, wasn't it? One of these noble deeds that never get into the papers."

Somehow his nonsense was bringing her back to him as he liked to watch her, and he was glad, though ignorant whether it had been a sad or a happy shadow. He leaned towards her, careless of the amused comment of his world—that world of infinite gossip. Self-consciousness was not his fault. The darling! He would make her laugh or die. . . .

"Who is that?" asked Judy curiously. "I haven't seen her before."

Gay followed her look.

A clumsy, large-limbed woman in a brown habit was riding into the chattering crowd that closed round her, scattering to let her through. As she moved on, not troubling to turn out of anybody's way, men talking deeply of politics and sport looked after her, and for a minute or two had to drop their subject. A long way behind, quite independently, a small girl comfortably astride, her gaitered legs sticking out manfully as she trotted, followed her on a pony.

"That is Sophia Bland," said Gay.

Maria was coming back to them, like a hen cleaving the poultry-yard to guard a stolen

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nest. Something in the way she fronted the new-comer, intimated hostility.

"So you are back?" she said, not too graciously.

The other woman nodded. She sat her horse loosely, as if she had been thrown on, and her boot swung with a spur. She was not handsome, but there was charm in her greenish eyes, and she had the mouth of a bad angel.

"I came down last night," she said. "How are you? You look oppressed with the cares of state—or is it a revolution? Oh, by the way, I've borrowed some spoons and forks. You don't mind, do you? I got into the cottage late and found we had forgotten the plate-basket. So I had to eat with my fingers. I really can't go on gnawing chickens' legs till they send it, so I told Alphonse to run round to you."

"Of course," said Maria hospitably, swallowing consternation.

"The worst of foreign servants," said the borrower airily, "is they *will* talk English. If they would only stick to their own tongue they'd be quite intelligible. I don't know what on earth Alphonse will ask for, but he'll imagine he is begging for spoons and forks."

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Maria could not help looking the least little bit perturbed.

"The housekeeper will give him whatever he wants," she said—but you know, Sophia, he terrified her last time you were down by insisting on a bonnet to make a stew."

"But the poor wretch must do something else," said Sophia blandly. Her glance, too lazy to be insolent, passed over Judy. "Is she staying with you?" she asked, and as Judy's cousin performed a backward introduction she nodded condescendingly at the girl. "Run in and see me any time," she said. "I am just below in the village. The first little house you meet tumbling into the road."

And then she turned to Gay.

"Have you seen Bill?" she asked. "Oh, I wish you would give me a mount on that thing. She would carry me better than you."

She rode on, calling up the child behind as if it had been a little dog.

It was then that Lauder came through the block in the gateway and approached, looking neither to right nor left. The man at Judy's bridle saw that shadow fall on her again—and he understood. He looked in her face so startled that she could not help answering his unuttered question.

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"I'm engaged to him," she said in a breath, as a child might trust a playmate with some tremendous secret. And Gay dropped back to fight himself.

Lauder took his place, claiming her openly, throwing out an intangible challenge to any who might dispute his right. She turned to him in a flutter.

He towered above her on his horse, a great, big, pawing beast, severely bitted. Strange that so slight a thing as she should be strong enough to lift him out of the bitterness of despair. Judy felt humble and yet exalted, as if she had done one good thing.

But his brows were heavy. Although he had come to her side and smiled and took possession, he was again looking straight before him. He had scarcely a word for her.

The throng was in real motion. Hounds were moving down the long furrow towards the bridle gate at the bottom, and the thundering cavalcade surged behind. For a minute the field was like a whirlpool and then it became a river, pouring through the narrow gate. A few not caring to join the crush and guessing at their destination, made a circuit; the rest fell in and pushed like sheep.

Judy, a little slow, found herself among the

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last, far from Burkinshaw and Maria. Lauder, muttering something about his unruly brute, had left her. She saw him in the distance thrusting his way along; and ahead of him in the press a brown habit, a woman who looked round and waved her hand.

"Don't go with the stream," called a voice to her over the hedge. Tokenhouse was standing up in his gig, flicking his driving whip. "They'll invest the Long Spinney so that not a fly can escape. Come round by the road and watch for them on the hill. They'll do nothing on the Flats. Too many asses out."

She turned back obediently.

A string of carriages rattled on the stones along the ill-kept road that turned sharp on the left up a steep hillside. From the heights, looking westward, they watched the sea of riders overflowing round a spinney, heard a wild holloa that sent them scattering.

"Where are the hounds?" cried Judy, with her hand shadowing her eyes.

"Hounds," said Tokenhouse, "are swallowed. You'll never see them."

The multitude was overrunning the country in a confusion that was ludicrous at a distance, pursuing a false alarm. And then, when the spinney itself seemed deserted, a red flash

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issued from it, and a string of leaping bodies, flinging themselves into the fallow, turning as the fox had turned to run up the furrow, and gaining impetus as they ran. A man in scarlet burst out of the thicket, another slipped round the corner, the horn sounded, and two or three skitters came scampering to join themselves to the pack.

"He's coming up," said a shepherd, standing on the road fence, ducking and almost toppling into the ditch.

"There's heaps of time," said Tokenhouse to the girl. "Keep your horse quiet. We shan't head him. He'll cross the road under that split ash tree and try for Laxton's."

Up came the fox as if shot out of a catapult, the hill nothing to him, as fresh as paint. His mask appeared in the hedge, his brush disappeared in the hedge beyond; a leap had taken him over the road so close to them that Judy started. And then hounds came tumbling through, hot on his scent, disappearing likewise.

"He's in Laxton's," said Tokenhouse. "Look at them bucketing up the hill."

A desperate army of stragglers, gathering from all quarters, squandering their horses on useless jumps, flurried by the mistake that had

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scattered them on the wrong side and wasted minutes, swarmed across the flat, chasing the wiser regiment that, turning a deaf ear to vagrant holloas, had clung to the spinney, and gained a start. These were already up. They came over into the road, landing one after another close to Judy and Tokenhouse, plunging into the field beyond.

"Don't follow them," said Tokenhouse. "He's in the cover. Hark at hounds! . . ." And truly there was an uproar in Laxton's, an angry tumult dying to a whimper, and bursting out again fitfully as the hounds scoured up and down inside, got on to him, and lost him, and took up his scent again. As Judy hesitated she saw Lauder bound over the hedge on his great beast, and keeping with him, stride for stride, the woman in the brown habit. They turned to the left, catching the tune in cover, and clattered down the road. He had not a glance to spare.

Tokenhouse was standing up in his gig surveying the errant herd tilting at the fences below, now more formidable for their spring tidying, patched and staked, with here and there a rail put in where there used to be a convenient gap. Here a man lost his stirrup and rolled off mysteriously, away from the

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jump that had undone him ; there another pitched over his horse's head. And the good riders came steadily on, clearing their fences, galloping like clockwork, slanting up the hill.

"You had better ride on," he said to Judy. "They'll turn him out."

It was drizzling. A black cloud hung over the Flats, trailing on the horizon, and all the distant noises were ominously clear.

Voices came up from the bottom corner where the road forked and the troops met, chafing at this check in a dart that had warmed up their horses and made them restive. Judy, timidly joining the strange crowd, found people looking at her. Some other woman made room for her to stand in under the trees.

"Don't mind my horse," she said. "He doesn't kick—but his red ribbon's useful. People don't crush on the top of him in the gates. So you are the girl. Oh, dear me, that fox is out already ! I thought we were going to have a good long gossip."

"How like a woman !" put in the man beside her, pressing on.

Judy was borne with the stream, carried in the rush towards Whissendine, that was as bewildering to her as the suddenness with

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which they all whipped round on the right, charging back. Burkinshaw had mounted her on a safe old horse, who had a kindly memory for his gates, and took her to them, humouring her with a fence occasionally, but letting her know who was master. It was no use tugging at his mouth, no good making efforts at independence. It was not surprising that she was never in the same field with Lauder, that Gay should fly past like lightning; that at last she should find herself struggling up a slope with the rain wet on her face blurring the figures dipping over the horizon, and no companion but a little girl on a pony.

The child looked at her solemnly, kicking at her pony until he was alongside.

"I've lost Parsons," she confided.

"Oh," said Judy politely. She recognised the infant as the child that had appeared at the meet with Sophia Bland. She seemed to be hunting independently, an impish sprite, born for mischief, with her mother's greenish eyes and an odd trick of ducking her head as she talked, as if dodging strangers' kisses.

"Parsons," she explained in her piping treble, "is responsible. He hooks me out of the ditches and says, 'the-Lord-be-praised-I've-got-'er.' It's delightful losing him. He

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snorts when he's looking for me. He swears too."

"Oh, does he?" said Judy.

"Not loud," said the child, "but I know, because he puts on the damn-look——" She paused and peered up in the girl's face, not wickedly, but with meaning. "The look mummy put on when somebody told her you were going to marry Bill. But mummy laughed. Parsons doesn't laugh. He is a serious man."

The girl was startled. Involuntarily her hands tightened on the reins, but her opinionated animal took no notice.

"Bill," said the child calmly, "belongs to us."

She jerked her wet locks out of her eyes, and drove her pony right into the tall hedge before them. Somehow or other they wriggled through, and when Judy herself found her way into the road that ran along the top—they had simply made a wide circle—she saw pony and rider, none the worse, but rather twiggy, in the road too.

Tokenhouse was still posted on the hill-top with his umbrella over his shoulder, as undisturbed as a rock in a troubled sea.

"Maria is looking for you!" he said. "She

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wants to keep you under her wing, but it's impossible. You look tired. Stay where you are. The fox has only taken a short excursion, he'll be back again in a moment. Fanty, you imp, come here. What have you done with your keeper ? ”

“ Slew him with an axe,” said Fanty.

She sped off suddenly. The hunt had twisted once more, and a fearful hullabaloo had been raised, triumph ending in disappointment, just beneath where they stood.

“ Gone to ground in the Gorse,” said Tokenhouse, looking over the hedge. “ Maria tells me you are engaged to Lauder.”

“ Yes,” said Judy. His expression was graver, his voice kinder . . . and the child's queer speech was running in her head. She did not know what to make of it. Her eyes must have held wistfulness. . . .

“ Poor child ! ” said Tokenhouse. “ Don't be angry. I am a wreck—a cripple—no more account than a stone image. You are fond of him ? ”

He bent forward. The rain trickled from his umbrella as he leaned it sideways. His slow voice had a human note in it that frightened her with its kindness.

“ I—I—don't know,” she said.

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And then, scarlet, she recovered herself, as shocked as if she had spoken treason.

"Oh, yes, yes, yes!" she cried hotly, not stopping to consider that this odd acquaintance had no claim on her confidence.

Up from below rose a new clamour. A fox had made an all but invisible passage slap through the middle of the wandering bands of people lunching and changing horses. A hoarse shout awoke as he darted up the hill, and the hounds came screaming after him. Right over the top he glanced, crossing the road a bit higher and keeping straight on.

"A fresh fox," said Tokenhouse, "and a good 'un. There he goes, over the brook! No more ringing this time; he's clear away."

Judy lost herself in the flood of riders pouring over the hill. Her horse, stirred to emulation, and going as he liked, carried her for a while famously. He had taken it into his head to gallop, and took his fences side by side with the flying squadron, but with a more elderly precision.

It was a dizzy ride, and drove out of her mind all other things while it lasted. Nothing seemed to matter but just to keep her place, to miss none of the joy of this swinging race. On all sides others were coming up, overtaking

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her, passing her with an encouraging shout ; and she laughed back to them, gripping the reins in her two hands, forgetting in her excitement that nervous little clutch at the saddle that betrayed the novice, as her horse rose with her into space.

She would have liked Lauder to see her, to call to her as he went tearing past, but the rate he was going was terrific ; he was out of sight in a moment.

Away in front hounds were swooping to the left, flickering over the railway line in dangerous proximity to a puff of smoke, and hurling themselves into a stiffer, more broken country.

The girl's horse was dropping back. She turned him into the road that lay almost parallel with the line they were running and tried to keep up ; but soon she lost sight of them altogether. One by one people fell out and came slowly back. Two or three women, splashed and dirty, stopped to speak to her.

" Maria was asking for you," said one of them. " I said if we overtook you we'd ride home together. She was afraid you would think it your duty to follow too far. It's no good going on. They've left Gunby Gorse, and they'll finish at the end of the world. We shan't get in before dark ourselves."

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The girl was glad of company, thinking nervously of the long journey along an unfamiliar way beset with cross-roads that she would have found it hard to puzzle out alone. Only why did they look at her with such a queer expression, a kind of comical sympathy?

They had ridden on a good way before she was fully conscious of it. The dusk was creeping up, and the horses had dropped from their dispirited homeward trot to a walk as they climbed a hill. And the woman on Judy's left spoke suddenly to the other.

"She's too young, Kate."

"Much too young."

"Am *I* too young?" asked Judy.

The first woman laughed. She had a plain, weather-beaten face and the big mouth that goes with abruptness. The other one was sallow, and her eyes were very tired.

"Bill Lauder, my child, is a dangerous experiment for a baby. Surely Maria could have found some hard-fisted woman——! Don't be offended. I am talking to myself."

The other woman cut in; her voice was smoother.

"You mustn't mind Augusta. She doesn't mean to hurt your feelings. She has no manners."

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"I am always sorry for girls," said Augusta. "Hold up, mare! They are at the mercy of anybody who likes to push them over. In the Middle Ages, now, you could put a man to the proof."

Judy felt somehow as if she were a doll, a puppet.

"An extravagant custom," said the woman on her other side. "Half the men were swallowed by dragons or spitted on lances."

"And a good riddance," snapped Augusta, smacking her mare that stumbled.

"I," said the sallow woman, "always tell girls to cross a street in London. If the man shoots ahead, leaving you to dive after him—if he claws at you, alarming you, saying you'll get run over—don't marry him for your life! But if he takes you over quietly, not frightening nor forgetting you, whatever the turmoil, and you're conscious of nothing but in moments his comfortable touch on your arm——"

Her voice failed and she hid its unsteadiness with a laugh. "I am qualified to talk," she said. "As one of Maria's blunders. I tried to mend her mistake later on for myself, and so she can't be civil to me, though Heaven knows——! I say, Augusta, it's too bad to let the child walk into this blindfolded."

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"She thinks we are a pair of evil prophets," said the other woman, and leaning over caught the girl's hand in hers and squeezed it, swinging it to and fro. "My dear, we're only savage because we don't think Bill Lauder deserves his luck. Don't be affronted with us. We can't help talking to you as if you were a kitten. . . . And beware of Sophia Bland!"

She put her horse into a trot, stopping Augusta with a warning shake of her head, and the three of them travelled on with no more dangerous discussion. And when they had left Judy at her own gate, they said good night to her hastily, as if they were ashamed.

There was something wrong.

The girl ran upstairs and changed quickly, hurrying down to watch for Maria.

It was still vague to her, glimmering, uncertain. The restlessness in Lauder's manner when he had come to her—and so soon left her—at the meet; the queer anxiety in Maria's; Tokenhouse's question. All were things little in themselves, not worth brooding over, capable of interpretation—but culminating in the bluntness of these two women who had always been kind to her.

She sighed a little, feeling friendless. Who

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would tell her the truth, explain to her, stop the pain that was not heartache, but hurt bewilderment? Her lip quivered and she flung back her head, fighting her tears, fingering the pearls at her throat. . . .

She heard the horses now, heard Maria and Burkinshaw tramping in the back way, the nearest way from the stables, all mud and mire. She ran down the hall to meet them.

"Oh, there you are," said Maria. "Don't come near me. I can't open my mouth till I've scrubbed."

She was making for the stairs, but halted.

"I am ashamed," she said, "of the way I looked after you. But I knew you would be all right. I asked so many people——"

Burkinshaw grunted heavily in the back-ground.

"Beginning with Bill Lauder," he said. "How many times did you stop your conscience by shrieking to him it was his business?"

"As many times as I got within earshot," said Maria; "but Judy understands. She knows a man can't dangle round her when hounds are running."

She departed, but her toilet was never a lengthy one; a bath, a snatching at some garment, and a twisting up of her hair. In a

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few minutes she came down again, clean but rampant.

"That foreign wretch of Sophia's!" she said. "The villain has been over and carried off to-night's fish and a tweed skirt, and heaven knows what else."

Judy, alone by the fire, rose and came to her. She must speak now. She must make Maria tell her. . . .

"The servants would give him their heads, if he asked them in broken English!" complained Maria. "It's too bad of her."

"I want to know," said Judy, all her doubts crystallising in one swift question,—had she not been sitting forming it on her lips for a long, long while, looking into the fire?—"what is between her and Major Lauder."

The suddenness of the attack had Maria off her guard.

"*What?*" she said bitterly, before she could check herself. "Why, the woman has been his evil genius!"

"Oh," said the girl.

"Yes," pursued Maria quite recklessly. "She probably intends to marry him, now she has divorced her husband. But it's too late, thank goodness. Poor Bill is out of her clutches—saved."

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There was a vindictive ring in her thankfulness that Judy could not miss. Was she then a tool, the instrument of Maria's private vengeance, and not as she had imagined a man's salvation? She saw herself with horror ignorantly playing the wicked part of robbing another woman. If she had been tricked, another had been betrayed. And she forgot, painting in her haste this black action, that it was not to Maria's machinations she had succumbed, but to the tremendous earnest, the desperate face of the man himself.

"Heavens! I am all unhooked," said Maria sharply; "but when Parker told me of that man's depredations I couldn't contain myself."

She returned incontinently to the maid out of whose hands she had bounced. And the hall was deserted.

The girl's heart was hot, and she was a thing of impulse. One thought came to her and thrilled her. She would go to the woman she had injured.

"Run in any time," Sophia Bland had said to her, with careless hospitality. And it was so near; a scant half-mile of semi-darkness lay between her and understanding. Judy stood up, possessed with courage, and gave

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herself no time to turn coward, as women should not, who would stand by each other.

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Sophia Bland lay along the sofa that stuffed half her sitting-room ; a lazy woman with half-shut eyes.

She had borrowed her house, as she borrowed all she wanted ; a convenient habit that had come down to her from her ancestors, famous on the Border and in ballads at raiding their neighbours' cattle. Enemies said that she had never paid for anything in her life. It was a quaint house, so small that all you could do when you got inside was to tumble into a chair, but the chairs were so comfortable that you had never a wish to rise. She only kept foreign servants, because anything that was said was audible all over the house. An intermittent chattering of French and Italian in the back premises did not disturb her more than the unintelligible chirping of cage-birds.

She was expecting a visitor.

He came in, so familiar with the house that there was no occasion for Alphonse to interrupt his chatter and let him in. Knowing where he would find her, he strode thither, stumbling over the rug in the passage.

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She did not turn her head; her hand clenched and unclenched, but her voice was drawling, betraying nothing but amusement.

"If you live to be a hundred, you'll always fall over that rug," she called.

"And you'll always let it lie about to trip me up," said Lauder.

"Because I should miss your stumble, and your swear, and the way you burst into my room," she said.

He had shut the door and walked to the fireplace, standing looking down at her. His manner was embarrassed.

"Well?" she said at last, lifting her eyes to his.

"I wish you wouldn't fill this room with peacocks' feathers."

"That was always a quarrel, wasn't it?" she said. "Do you remember, Bill, when you first said you couldn't bear them? It was in somebody else's house. . . . And the next time you came I had this room stuffed with them as it is. Do you remember standing in the doorway quite pale with superstition, refusing to set foot in it till I gave you leave to burn them? But you couldn't keep away. Bill——"

She paused, and looked at him.

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"If you like," she said, "I'll give in. It was a stupid trick to tease you, and you've always hated the things. I'll let you gather them up and take them into the garden and burn them all to-night."

"It's hardly worth while," he said.

Neither spoke for a minute.

"Well?" she said again, in the same mocking, expectant tone.

"I didn't stay to the end," he said. "Not much later than you did. I wanted to see you, Sophia."

"Alphonse heard you come in. He'll know you are dining with me," she said. "Sit down, Bill. Don't look like a criminal in the dock."

"You came back here sooner than you expected," he said stupidly.

"Perhaps," she said. "I heard I was wanted. The world's so kind."

"Damned interfering," said Lauder, and then, "Sophia——"

She laughed. It seemed that after all he was dumb. She was not going to help him; no, though she saw him desperately trying to say what between these two could hardly bear to be said. She lay back among her cushions watching him, his darkening brows, his impatient hand pulling at his moustache. . . .

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"Did you hear anything out hunting?" he said at last.

"I heard," she said, "a ridiculous rumour, too extravagant to repeat."

"Well," he said, "it was true."

She clasped her hands round her knees, smiling into his eyes.

"You don't know what it was," she said, "or you wouldn't say that. It wasn't that you are ruined, it wasn't that you'd been turned out of your clubs, warned off the Turf—it was a wilder tale. They said you were engaged to marry some little fool."

He smiled.

The house was quite still. Its kitchen chatter had been suddenly quieted. Man and woman, they faced each other.

"Bill," she said, "it's impossible. Don't talk madness."

"You had to know," he muttered. "It's come to the worst, Sophia. You had to know."

"And so," she said, "you allowed the public to break it—gently?"

A dull red mounted to his brow; he winced at her tone, but his own was dogged.

"I'd have come straight to you," he said. "I didn't know you were here till I saw you;

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and then with all their cursed tongues wagging——”

“You thought I might be too melodramatic. You thought you’d rather have it out quietly by ourselves?”

Lauder was not subtle. He missed the warning shake in her voice.

“I’m glad you are sensible,” he said. “I’m infernally glad, Sophia. It makes a man feel less of a brute, you know. It was that or ruin.”

“What is the—person like?” said Sophia smoothly.

“Oh,” he said vaguely, “she’s quite harmless.”

“And I am to whistle for a husband?” she said, in the same purring tones. “Why did you let me divorce Sandy? He was like an umbrella, an awkward thing to carry about with you, but useful to keep in a corner and hold over your hat in the rain.”

“If things hadn’t gone so badly,” said the man, “we might—— But we could never have married. It would have been ruin, the blackest ruin. It couldn’t be done.”

“Oh, don’t apologise,” she said. She rose to her feet, flinging off the mildness that had served her to disarm the sullen temper he had

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relied on to defend him against her tears, and at last letting her face betray her. "Do you think I can't guess that this is Maria's doing? Will nothing teach that woman——! Her plot to get you out of my dangerous hands."

She came to him, but not quite close, out of his reach.

"And so," she said, "you desert me?"

He tried to take her hands, but she put them behind her back.

"No," he said. "By God, no, Sophia! You're the only woman——! What is this to us——?"

She laughed.

"Was that in your mind?" she said. "You thought I'd forgive you; cry a little and rage a little, and then forgive you? That we'd go on running our horses together—people are so charitable, who would care?—and we're neither of us particular about the world's opinion. You took that for granted?"

"You're hitting too hard," he said. His voice was hoarse. "We've always been pals——"

"Yes," she said, "and you throw me over; you make me a laughing-stock."

He moved then as if he would have liked to hush her bitterness in his arms, but dared not,

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afraid of himself. Sophia came nearer still and laid her hand on his arm.

"I might forgive you," she said. "I might behave like a woman and a fool—if I were as fond of you, Bill, as you are of me."

He had just strength to shake off that hand, but he could not shake off her spell with it.

"You don't know what you are doing," he said, breathing hard. "You don't know how deep I am. It's not ordinary want of money; it's worse. Think of all the straits a man can be driven to, all the dangerous tricks that come easy in desperation; and don't tempt a poor devil when you can't even then understand what's hanging over him."

"I don't care," she said. "You can't do without me. We're too like each other. If you lose me you lose half yourself. Look at me."

Unwillingly he submitted.

"It's all or nothing," she said. "A few ugly secrets whitewashed, a few debts paid—and a harmless idiot everlastingly in your way to remind you how you snatched at her money . . . or life with me. Bill, nothing on earth matters to you but me. You'll go all to pieces without the one woman who understands

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you. It's for your sake as well as mine that I will not let you go."

He had underrated his weakness. A man could not be stronger than himself. The sordid barriers he had set up went down before her. And she was sure of him ; she held him ; she lifted her smiling mouth.

"We'll be paupers, adventurers, wanderers—you and I," she said in a whisper.

"All right," he said ; as reckless. "Kiss me."

In the silence chirped a shrill, childish voice. There was a draught in the passage—steps.

"D'you want mummy ? Have you come to borrow Bill ? He is here, but you can't have him." And then, confidentially, but no less shrilly, "I was playing at two frogs. The pillow is put to bed and it sleeps like me. It's so agreeable in the dark. You can't see that you aren't really things ; and it's most mysterious, hopping."

"That imp of mine !" laughed the woman.

They heard Alphonse running up the passage exclaiming, ushering a stranger—not one of Sophia's intimates who would have come right in—into the adjoining room. They heard a young voice, not a man's voice, explaining.

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"Damnation!" said Lauder.

The woman who had won him back saw his face as he loosed his arms.

She turned away, took three short steps, and paused, glancing back at him with her hand at the door.

"Poor Bill," she said; "it's not worth it, is it? I'll see you through."

She caught up her trailing skirts on her arm. Already she had her idea; her voice was strained but low, although her eyes were desperately scornful. Outside the hush was broken by a pattering in the distance, coming nearer—a tired horse passing up the village.

"So this is the—harmless person," she mocked. "And she has come here to find you. Never mind, Bill, you shan't be compromised. Alphonse,"—he was grimacing by the stairs, and she spoke to him fast in French—"run up to Lucie and tell her to slip on one of my tea-gowns and hurry down here. Tell her to make loud conversation in this room with Major Lauder. She's the Comtesse de—Charny; she dines with us."

And she ran out into the road.

It was not likely to trouble Sophia that the

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belated sportsman she intercepted was an unknown. He had a red coat on, and looked like a gentleman ; he would do. She stopped him and took him captive. Tokenhouse, driving through the village in his gig on his way to Melton, was also seized.

"Come along in," she said ; "I want you."

"What is the matter ?" he asked, looking from her to the startled countenance of the stranger who, thunderstruck but obedient, was dismounting. "Have you turned highwayman ?"

"I'll tell you afterwards," she said. "Mr. . . . I don't know your name, you know. Duncan, is it ? Oh, very well, Mr. Duncan, if you'll be so good as to take your horse through that gate and shout, my man will look after him—and they'll put up your animal, Tokenhouse."

"I'm going over to dine with Lord Robert," said Tokenhouse ; but Sophia took no notice.

"Look after my prisoner," she said. "I don't know who he is ; Providence brought him to me and I took him. I just ran out and told him it was a bet and appealed to his sporting instincts ; and I'm doing the same

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to you. What luck you passed! Turn him over to Alphonse and let him make a toilet—and take him into the back sitting-room and talk, all of you, till I come.”

She left them standing in the road, and Tokenhouse turned to her other victim who was holding on to his horse, blank with bewilderment.

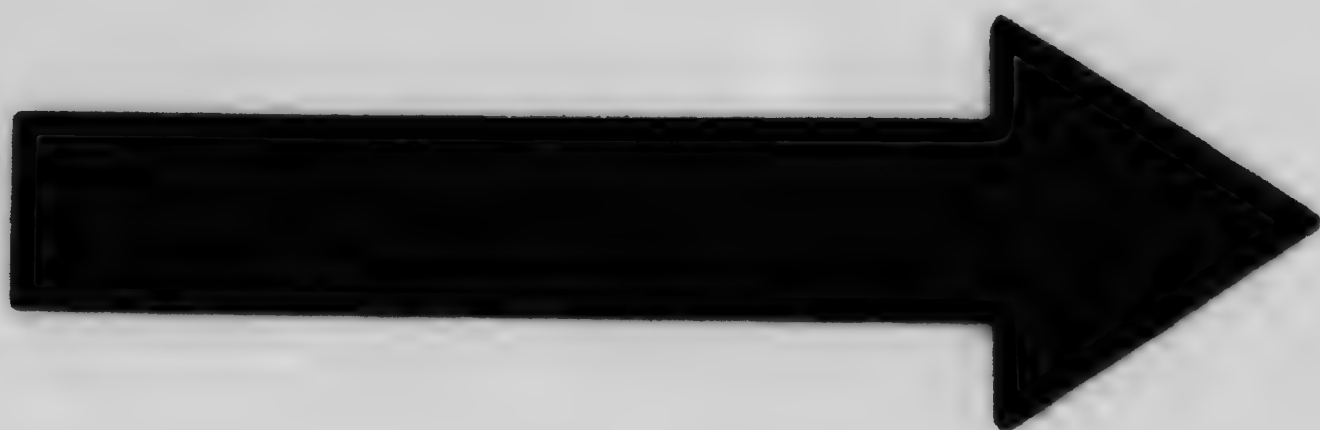
“I say, you know——” he began.

“I’m afraid,” said Tokenhouse gravely, “we must do as Lady Sophia tells us.”

“Oh, certainly,” said the other helplessly; and then he brightened. “Is she Lady Sophia Bland? I’ve heard of her. Oh, of course! But it was a bit of a startler. I don’t know my way about, and this old horse . . . we’ve been trying for hours to make our way back to Melton. Of course, I’ll do it, if it’s a bet.”

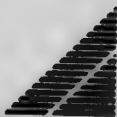
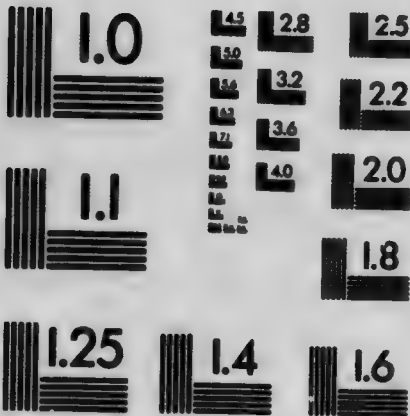
Sophia passed swiftly into the house and confronted the enemy.

The girl was not sitting; she stayed like a frightened bird in the farthest corner of the room. Her lips were pale and her eyes beseeching. She could not utter what she had come to say. And Sophia felt with an odd



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pique that her generalship was wasted. Here was no vulgar suspicion to circumvent. She came forward, however, playing the part she had undertaken with an air of middle-aged good-nature.

"My dear," she said, stretching out her hands, "is anything the matter? You look so tragic."

It was impossible to ask this woman, secure in her attitude of amused encouragement, the question that had answered itself for Judy when she had come here doubting and found that Lauder was in the house. She had thought then that it must be true, had waited for Sophia full of remorse and pity. But it was no haggard, forsaken woman whose reproaches she had to bear. She was ashamed.

"I came to you," she said brokenly, "because . . . oh, I don't know how to tell you, Lady Sophia. Laugh at me; please laugh at me! I didn't want to hurt anybody—and they told me that Major Lauder——"

"My good girl," said Sophia, "you don't mean to say you're jealous? How frightfully amusing! Of course, I know all about it. I know you are engaged to Bill."

There was talking in the next room—incessant talking; but Sophia was listening to

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hear men's voices striking into the untiring treble. How slow they were.

"I suppose," she said, "some ill-natured wretches have been making mischief. You shouldn't be so credulous; you should have asked Maria. She would have calmed your scruples. Did you come rushing over here to confront your hated rival?"

Her tone of easy banter stained Judy's cheeks with scarlet.

"I came," she said faintly, "to tell you I would—I would—give him up to you."

Sophia Bland drew in her breath sharply, but she was smiling all the time.

"Indeed?" she said. "How very magnanimous. But I don't think Bill would like it. My dear—how young you are!"

Men were speaking now in the inner room, their voices mingling with the voluble foreign one; and Lauder was talking with them. The two distinguished his deeper notes, and the girl started.

Sophia caught her suddenly by the arm.

"Don't talk of giving him up," she said. "You don't know what it means to him. Marry him, marry him, I tell you! You can't let any schoolgirlish romancing interfere. What does it matter what people say? They

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are all liars. . . . If you don't marry him he'll put a bullet through his head."

The girl shuddered, staring at her, afraid of her in that minute of terrible seriousness. And then Sophia dismissed tragedy with a disdainful flourish of her hands.

"There," she said, "forgive me. We mustn't rant, either of us. But poor Bill is a friend of mine, and I stick to my friends. One can do that without sentiment, do you know? He is here to-night. I've two or three people dining with me. We'll pretend I asked you as a surprise for him, and I'll send a message up to Maria—and he shall take you home after dinner. You silly girl, did you run all the way here in such little slippers?"

It was a queer dinner.

Lauder was in a boisterous humour that Judy had not known in him; but that did not seem so strange to Sophia, who, falling into his mood, was gay. He could not bear silence, but talked loudly—and his glass was always empty. The foreign countess carried out her task with aplomb, fine in Sophia's purple, chattering broken English to a bedazzled young man whose brain was confused by this marvellous wind-up to his day's hunting in

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Leicestershire, and who sat bewitched, with his pale straw-coloured hair brushed wet on his forehead, wearing his hunting coat and a skimpy pair of Alphonse's trousers, and looking for all the world like a rabbit in a trance.

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"Oblige me with an explanation," said Tokenhouse later on.

Sophia came from the door ; she had shut it upon Judy's penitent face, upturned and wistful, as she went away with Lauder.

"You're all the world's confidant, Tokenhouse," she said.

He followed her back into the sitting-room, with its walls decorated with peacocks' feathers, gleaming bizarre and ominous everywhere. With the privileged closeness of an old acquaintance he watched her face as she flung herself on the sofa and collapsed into shrieking mirth. The other guest had been sent on to his journey's end in Tokenhouse's gig, leaving his exhausted hireling ; and the foreign lady had returned to her own shape.

"I am curious," repeated Tokenhouse drily, rolling a cigarette. "I recognised Madame Lucie."

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"It's all simple," said Sophia. She quieted herself with an effort. "Do justice to my talents! That child had heard there was something between Bill and—me. She burst into the house. Did you ever hear of anything so frantic? I had to surround him with chaperons in a minute."

"I wonder," said Tokenhouse slowly, "why you let it go on."

"Wonderful, isn't it?" she repeated. "And I've only to lift my finger——"

She was silent for a little while, meeting his scrutiny without subterfuge, indifferent to his judgment.

"I know that," he said.

She was still struggling against her laughter. All that was left of it now was like a sob in her throat.

"You saw me abdicate," she said. "You're my witness. . . . It's freezing, but she will be warm. I wrapped her up in a cloak of mine. What more could any woman do?"

Tokenhouse smoked on quietly; his abstracted manner, that seemed to take note of nothing, begat confidences, and had before to-night quenched hysterics.

"Do you think," he inquired impartially, "that it was fair to her?"

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"Oh," said Sophia bitterly, "she is madly in love with him."

"Perhaps," said Tokenhouse. There was doubt and an odd shadow on his face. "But from what I used to know of Lauder he is not the man to be kind to a woman who has not got him under her heel."

"And do you imagine," said Sophia contemptuously, "that that matters to any woman?"

"Unkindness?"

"We live upon it; it's the breath of life!"

So he was not sorry for her. She was vaguely jealous although she had not asked for his pity. It was not she, but the insignificant item in the play, the cipher that neither she nor Lauder had taken seriously into account, that had awakened the looker-on's philosophic compassion. That was strange.

"You are looking very oddly at me, Tokenhouse," she complained.

"Sorry," he said; "I could not help it. Really, Sophia, I did not know you were so remorseless."

She laughed.

"Would you have had me take him back at her hands?" she said. "She came—you

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pity *her*? A quixotic little fool who would throw herself into the fire for strangers."

Suddenly she turned away her face, flinging out one hand to him, clenching the other hard.

"Go away," she said. "For God's sake, go away, Tokenhouse. I am going to cry."

CHAPTER V

"**H**ERE I stand under the signpost," said Lord Robert, "calculating how many of us are dead."

"As far as I can see," said Rafferty, "we are the same old crew."

"Man, you are seeing ghosts. I have been attending funerals all the summer."

"Don't be so infernally dismal," said Rafferty, who had a liver and felt jumpy in the murky November atmosphere to which, arriving from abroad, he had not yet become acclimatised.

"If you feel like that," said Lord Robert 'th a twinkle, "ride that wall-eyed camel of yours into the middle of them and rake up old associations. Mind you ask Crocker how his wife is, and Lady Brockton if her husband's out."

"Dead?" said Rafferty, in an awed undertone.

"No; changed hands."

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He screwed his head round to stare at somebody in the distance.

Rafferty had grown smugger, less enterprising, more like a bachelor uncle; he would be sworn he was as bald as a billiard ball under that too large hat. That a man could alter so in one destructive summer! It was appalling.

People had not yet settled down, although they had been drifting back all through the cubbing season. Those who had arrived were wandering backwards and forwards exchanging experiences, taking up the old intimacies where they had been interrupted. There had been the usual General Post in houses, and it was necessary before all things to make inquiries or run the risks attendant on turning up uninvited in the house of your enemy, that had last year been the familiar hearth of a friend. It was easy to guess at the state of a man's finances when he told you that he had let the Hall and turned into the Vicarage, or announced that he had got an American at his place.

Sometimes the luck was the other way—not so often—and those who had spent last winter crowded into a cottage were able to do without the usurper and expand into the home of their ancestors for a season.

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Here and there men were taking stock of each other's horses, sometimes charitably enlightening a purchaser upon the bad points of one with whom they had in the past been too well acquainted, or jealously admiring another that had slipped through their fingers; one, perhaps, that had come on amazingly since they had parted with him in the spring. Occasionally their interested inspection was dashed by a twinge of regret. There is no sight more pathetic than the wistful look of a hunter who knows his business and has passed into bad hands.

Lord Robert perceived that the man in the distance was the person he took him for, and no impertinent stranger in his likeness, and hailed him gladly.

"Let's have a look at you," he said. "*You* have all your arms and legs, and you haven't grown a beard. They may say what they please, but the joy of meeting familiar faces is a doubtful joy. Unless you keep your eye on a man all the summer he's apt to be unrecognisable when you meet him at Kirby Gate."

"You are the same," said Gay, making room for a lady to pass, and betraying by his start

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as his hand went hastily to his hat that he had been thrown out by the new colour of her hair.

"Outwardly," said Lord Robert. "Time writes nothing on my cast-iron cheek, though I've been chased by a widow over two continents. Tell me the worst about yourself. Married?"

"Oh, Lord, no," said Gay.

"I congratulate you," said Lord Robert, wringing his hand. "I know of six poor devils——! As I say, I nearly made one of them myself. Shouldn't have shown my face here again if I had gone under. Two things put me off: the ceremony and the lady. If you could take chloroform and get it mercifully over there would only be one objection. Have you seen that little thing—girl with a gun factory—who married Lauder?"

"No," said Gay.

His horse shifted, perhaps obeying some unconscious motion in his rider. And there was that in his tone that attracted Lord Robert's notice.

"She's down here," he said. "They have taken Burkinshaw's house for the season. *They* are moving to Somerby. That was one of Maria's mistakes."

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Gay was looking straight before him. He spoke casually, but Lord Robert was not deceived.

"A mistake?" he said.

"Yes," he said. "Maria took it into her head that nobody could sweep the chimneys; they meandered too much, had kinks in them. She was sure there were hidden stores of soot all over the house, and it would go on fire and they would be burnt in their beds——"

"I thought," said Gay, "you were talking about that—marriage."

Lord Robert looked innocent.

"Was I?" he said. "Oh, that is a worse mistake than the chimneys. I ran across them once or twice in the summer. He bullies her. It's his nature. He'll never forgive her for her money. At least that is my opinion."

"The brute!" said Gay.

"Oh," said Lord Robert. "He's not the kind to be decent to anybody who doesn't stand up to him. What are they putting hounds in the Pastures after we've been hanging round it for half an hour?"

He passed on, turning round for a last word.

"Oh, Gay, if you see Sophia Bland with a millionaire in tow—you'll know him, he is so ugly—take an opportunity of urging him to be

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careful. He's on that mild old Roman-nosed bay of Houston's—bought him at Tattersall's ; and he's been told it's a perfect demon."

But his kind recommendation was unheard.

Gay had not thought himself such an absolute fool.

True, he had often looked over his fields at the house that had passed from Burkinshaw's occupation into Lauder's. There was no reason he should not look. He tried to convince himself that one long, dull summer had laid the ghost of his brief incursion into romance. What was the matter with him ?

He had not even seen her yet ; not seen her since she married. Perhaps she had forgotten his face.

He remembered how she used to look at strangers. She had not acquired that formidable blankness that other women assumed. There was something of the child in her expectation ; as if she were only wanting encouragement to break into a smile at all the world. Gay felt he could just bear that she should look at him like that.

Sophia Bland was coming up the road with a man in attendance, joining the little group at the cross-roads. The horse she was riding

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had not carried a habit before, and kept glancing round at her in not altogether pleased astonishment. The man who seemed to belong to her was a stout man with a chalky face, who was absorbed in keeping a sharp look out for vagaries on the part of his steed, now behaving like a lamb. Sophia drew in beside Gay. Her eyes were restless.

"What are they doing?" she said. "Are they going to find? Is it cub-hunting, or what?"

"I believe we are serious," said Gay, "but you know, once we get hung up in Ashby Pastures——!"

Parties were wandering up and down. There was a whimper in the cover; hounds were ranging hopefully in the blind undergrowth. But nobody expected the luck of an immediate start.

"Let's move on into the field," said Sophia. The man with her demurred.

"There is a crowd in there," he said. "I don't like to take this horse among them. It's the first time I've had him out, and I'm told he's vicious."

"He doesn't look it," said Gay.

"I didn't know of it before," said his owner; "but if you examine him you see he has a

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treacherous eye. More than one man has come up and warned me since I came out."

A smothered chuckle in the background explained matters to Gay.

"Send him home," said Sophia impatiently.

"Not before I conquer him," said the millionaire. Gay was instantly reminded of a photograph in a newspaper, representing this man as a giant controlling the destinies of a continent, ruling thousands with a rod of iron. The colossal mind was at work, anticipating a struggle on a minor scale. He laughed.

And then he knew by his leaping pulses who it was that was coming. She at last. . . .

Sophia had changed her mind. She was not riding on. She, too, was watching the approaching figures. At the cross-roads you could see all comers, sweep the country with its running lines of hedges, here and there red as rust, and the rain-clouds trailing across like smoke.

She said a word to her neighbour and reined in close to him, parading their intimacy. As Lauder and his wife passed by she bent and again said a word to her neigh-

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bour. . . . The man, who had slackened instinctively, rode on, and his brow was sullen.

Gay never saw him. His gaze was riveted on the one face, wondering. Was this Judy?

All the laughter, all the gracious impulsiveness was gone from her face. It was still sweet, but with an unhappy sweetness. What had the man done to her?

Without knowing how, he found himself at her side.

"Oh!" she said.

She had not forgotten him. It was joy unimaginable, driving out the anger in his soul, to see her light up at the sight of him, finding him again, a friend who had laughed with her, been careless with her, a hundred years ago.

"So you have come back to us," he said.
"We are all—glad to have you. What have you been doing to yourself?"

"Nothing," she said faintly. "Nothing."

"The fox is playing hide-and-seek in there," he said. "Stand in under the trees and watch. You'd like it. There he goes. No, they're not killing him. Why, the safest place for a fox, in cover, is in the middle of the pack."

He hardly knew what he was saying as he

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piloted her into the field. She had always been shy in gateways, afraid of her horse rubbing against other horses. . . . He neither knew nor cared what had become of Lauder.

All those who were not engaged in wandering in and out of the cover, losing themselves in the twisting rides that, instead of traversing the wood, wound deeper and deeper in, had gathered at the top corner in a swarm. The fox was meant to break out below, but refused, and was being rushed from end to end with hounds scurrying at his heels, all but tumbling over him in a sudden turn. There was a mad rustle amongst the fallen leaves and grasses, an occasional flash of reddish-brown, and then a disconcerting silence.

Judy leaned over her horse's neck, gazing in. Now and then a puzzled hound came out beside her and looked plaintively in her face.

An urchin had thrown himself into the wood, ragged, enthusiastic, plunging right and left through the briars, snuffing like a dog. "I smell 'un—I smell 'un!" he cried at intervals, persevering as hounds leapt over him, upsetting him in the tangle, rolling him over in the confusion, unhurt as the fox himself. All at once he uplifted his dirty face, peering

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upwards with a yell of triumph, pointing at a fox in the tree above him, scarcely distinguishable, so still, so flat he lay along the branch. No cub that, who had to be harried into the open. His glittering eyes took in discovery, and his leap carried him over the enemy's head. Landing like a cat on his pads, he made a dash of it, leaving uproar behind. Scratched, but glorious, the imp wriggled through the hedge after him, holloaing with all his might; and hounds crashed out into the field, and flung themselves on his scent.

"Here, Columbus." A man shouted, throwing him a bit of silver as he galloped past; a little girl on a shaggy pony stood up in her stirrups and slashed at him with her whip.

"You traitor, you little base traitor!" she cried at him.

"That's my infant. Hark at her!" said Sophia Bland.

"I—I—like that child," said Judy, looking up at Gay.

"This way," he said.

Her horse was fighting for his head, and her piteous glance at him was instinctive. She followed him unquestioning in what looked like the wrong direction, but brought them

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to the front as the pack streamed round on the right, pelted across the open green space below the wood and spread over the fallows towards the Trussels, turning sharp as the fox, baulked in his first intention, left that matted thicket on his right, and diving down the steep embankment, reappeared on the other side of the railway, skirting Dalby and making for Green Hill.

Judy could not hold her horse. It was all she could do to keep him straight, and Gay was thankful when she got over a fence or two without disaster. He shouted encouragingly to her as he shot in front and picked out the weakest place in a big hedge, trusting that she would follow him. But her horse swerved and blundered over further down, almost landing into a pond. He thundered alongside, breathing hard, too excited to look where he was going, or feel the light hands that had no grip on him. Luckily they were in a wide field, all ridge and furrow, with the ridges lying crosswise. Galloping over that took it out of him, sobered him a trifle before he reached the stiff post and rails beyond. Gay did not know how anxious he was until he saw that she had got over safe.

In the bottom hounds had checked ; they

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were feathering up and down, bringing the field to a halt. But a shepherd, standing at gaze on the side of the hill, had fallen suddenly flat on his face. He had seen the fox coming up.

"It's Gartree Hill, sure enough," said Gay. "Let's bear to the right. There, hounds are on his line. We'll keep to the lane. That horse is a little too much for you, isn't he?"

She answered him between breathless gasps.

"I think so," she said; "but my husband says that I am a coward."

Her husband. . . . Gay could just distinguish him in the distance, charging down, the last to pull up at the huntsman's warning hand, the first to break rank. Anger shook him, but he schooled himself to keep his footing as a comrade without aspiring to the dangerous office of a champion. It was safer for her he should not.

"Come along," he said. "We'll be there as soon as they are. Don't hurry; I'll unlatch that gate."

They swung out of the lane, galloped a little way on the high road, and turned off, stamping through the deep mud in the passage at the back of the cover that let them up on to the bleak hill-top. Hounds were just disappearing

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into the cover itself and an avalanche of horsemen was gathering on the summit ready to sweep over the edge into the valley.

"I think," said Judy in a low voice, "I see my husband looking for me."

But if she had hoped to blind the world to the state of affairs between them her effort was useless. Nothing could have made the truth clearer than Lauder's churlish reception of her, and her chidden look as she turned from him. Gay ground his teeth, resisting his inclination to push to her side again before them all.

"Do you see that?" said Lord Robert. "That's how it is between them. A shame, isn't it? It wouldn't hurt the man to be civil to her in public. Glory, here comes the millionaire!"

Sophia Bland rode over the brow of the hill, and with her, but at a little distance, her preoccupied admirer. Lord Robert, singling him out, circled round him judicially.

"How has old Fireworks been conducting himself?" he inquired.

"Surprisingly well, so far," said the victim with caution. "No doubt he is waiting his opportunity. Once or twice I had to let him see I was on my guard."

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"He's a deceitful beast," agreed Lord Robert. "I've known him go a whole day like a sheep, and then, without any warning, become a demon. That was how he killed Parkinson, wasn't it?"

The man he appealed to nodded, incapable of speech.

"It takes uncommon pluck to ride him," said Lord Robert respectfully. "Poor Johnny Blackwood bought him just as you did—off a dealer, and wouldn't believe in his history when we told him. Said he was an idle horse, and took spurs to him. He just arched his back once, breathing fire and brimstone, and that was the end of Johnny. I suppose he owes it to his mild nose that he's not been shot. Each man who sees him thinks the poor animal has been slandered. Old hypocrite!"

He shook his head gloomily at the horse, blinking consciously in his face.

"He thinks you're singing his praises," said one of the listeners.

"So he does; but I shan't gratify him with a list of his killed and wounded."

"The horse won't kill me," said his present owner with much firmness.

"I dare say not. But you can't be too

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careful," said Lord Robert. "I'm told he goes meekly as long as he thinks he's master. Humour him ; humour him."

He edged away as Sophia Bland came within earshot. She called to him.

"What's going on ?" she said.

Lord Robert looked gently surprised.

"Oh, nothing at all," he said. "We were only admiring your friend Potter's wonderful horsemanship. He must be a joy to you. Tell me, now, is there any limit to what that man will swallow ?"

Sophia raised her eyebrows but did not trouble to protect her satellite.

"I really don't know," she said ; "he has a great sense of his own importance. I suppose he doesn't think anybody would dare to meddle with it."

"Ah," said Lord Robert, "that's the trap with the big ones of the earth. Look at him. See the deadly seriousness he puts into the job of outwitting the ancient Roman. An ordinary fool would have found out for himself that he hasn't a kick in him, let alone the mysterious devilishness we've been putting down to his score. How did you capture the man ? Was it in a museum ?"

She laughed carelessly, moving along.

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Hounds. were working silently in the cover. There was a peculiar calm that portended something.

"I was rude to him," she said, "and he was astonished. Since then he has never left me."

"Are you going to marry him?" said Lord Robert, with his head on one side, like an elderly magpie.

It did not suit him to drop his voice, for out of the tail of his eye he saw the man whose infatuation for Sophia had been common knowledge, and whom report said she had never forgiven for his defection, approach. Curiosity prompted him, not any wish to help her to punish a deserter. . . . It was amusing to see Lauder as black as a thunder-cloud.

Sophia lifted her eyes, lazy, inscrutable.

"Perhaps I am," she said.

And then arose a tremendous cry. The horses quivered with excitement, scarcely to be restrained until the fox leapt out across the road below, springing on till he was screened from view by the Lake Plantations, through which hounds raced without a pause.

"What I am going to do," said Lord Robert, letting the galloping tide go by and

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setting off by himself, "is to cut along the bottom and climb the heights. With luck I'll get to Burrough Hill Wood first. I'm not out for exercise, but judicious contemplation of other men's mistakes."

He plodded through the clay in the deep lane that he had chosen, turning a deaf ear to the cry of hounds, now nearer, now fainter, skirmishing on his left; and stopped on the other side of the valley to exchange opinions with Tokenhouse, posted there in his gig.

"Your fox has run up the draining furrow in that ploughed field," said Tokenhouse; "he's in the wood."

Hounds came scampering over the cart-road at the bottom of the hill, confident, till they were brought to their noses by the fresh-turned earth, giving tongue delightedly as they hit upon the furrow and ran along it in single file.

"That proves what I say," said Lord Robert. "Turn your back on them and they'll run after you to the end of the world. Look at the field now, in beautiful disorder—half of them left and the others blowing. Huilo, you sluggards! Your horses are all too fat."

"What did you come out for?" said

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Rafferty, who had outlived catastrophe in the form of a blind ditch at the back of Little Dalby.

"To study my horse's idiosyncrasies," said Lord Robert. "They all have 'em. The one you are on—for the present—likes getting rid of his rider. The best one I ever had couldn't stand perambulators. Traction engines were flies to him, and balloons mere bubbles; but when there was any risk of meeting a nurserymaid I had to ride him in blinkers."

"Was that the one that bolted with you last year," said Rafferty, "while you were trying to sell him?"

"It was," said Lord Robert sadly. "We discarded the blinkers to show off his fine round eye, never expecting to meet the foe wandering with the Cottessmore in the lost wastes beyond Crown Point and Dead Man's Bone. But all at once I felt him shiver under me, and he shied into the customer and then nearly carried me to perdition before I got a pull on him. I didn't sell him. . . . But it wasn't his fault, poor beast! There *was* a perambulator, though put to illegitimate uses. An old tramp was wheeling it in the wilderness filled with sticks."

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"And what's the matter with this one?" said Rafferty.

"His peculiarity," said Lord Robert, "isn't so uncommon; he can't go."

He drew on one side, passing the crowd in review as they collected, winding up Burrough Hill.

"Your hobby is human nature, isn't it, Tokenhouse?" he said. "It's what you come out to see?"

"Hardly," said Tokenhouse abstractedly. He was not attending. The main body had massed itself under the overhanging wood, a few were climbing still, and in the bottom solitary individuals, thrown out in the ring round Dalby, were making haste to retrieve their errors and get up without remark. Away on the left a discreet train of second horsemen were approaching by a line of gates; and far back in the distance rang the screaming, dying into a wail, of watchers who had sighted another fox.

"Anyhow, it amuses you," said Lord Robert. "I'll give you a hint; there's trouble brewing. Oh, not the usual thing. I distrust that fellow Lauder. He never was the kind to pull up in time, and Sophia Bland is bent on paying him out for the way

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he behaved to her. It doesn't matter to her who suffers. If she's not careful she'll drive him a bit too far."

"Meaning?" said Tokenhouse.

"Oh, I don't mean anything," said Lord Robert; "I never do. But I've heard how the wind sits in a good many quarters."

Tokenhouse looked up at the sky.

"It is going to rain," he said.

"I hope so," said Lord Robert. "We want it to take the gloss off a few of us. It's painful to see fellows hunting in clean new clothes. Mum's the word, but—Lauder has taken to drinking hard. Why the deuce did he go and marry that little thing?"

He went off grumbling; the commotion yonder made it evident that he would have to follow up and join the others in scrambling along the top.

Tokenhouse remained like a sentinel in his gig, in abstracted contemplation of sky and land. He was not in a talkative humour. Perhaps habit was strong on him, and to a man who had done with activity there was something bitter in the sight of his old associates carrying on a life out of which he had dropped. There were too many known faces in this crowd that had broken like a devastating

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horde upon the quietness of existence, and the shock of reminiscence affected him as it affected them, imparting a touch of awkwardness to the meeting.

Before November was out the men would have settled into comfortable forgetfulness of the feeling that prompted them to be a little too jovial, a little too cheery in greeting the derelict, before sinking their voices to explain his history to the others who did not know.

Sophia Bland, riding home in the dusk, slackened her pace when she heard another horse behind, but did not turn her head.

She had left the hunt in company with others, but these had gone their ways, and she was travelling the last mile or two alone. It did not trouble her ; hers was not a nature to start at shadows, to see tramps in a hedge-row, phantoms lurking behind a barn.

She knew who the man was who was lessening the distance between them with every stride, hardening his heart to address her. Often and often they had ridden home together along this lane, close and confidential, their tired horses keeping step, stumble for stumble, and far behind them the horn sounding its melancholy lament at the back of Adam's Gorse. But times had changed.

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"Will you never make friends?" he said.

She pulled her horse on to the grass at the far side of the lane.

"It's no use," she said. "Ride home with the married woman."

No Egyptian could have flung him more bitterness in that word.

"Confound her!" said Lauder, under his breath, loud enough for Sophia to hear.

"Stick to your bargain," she said. "I warned you, Bill. It's no use your dogging me, trying to patch up a kind of friendship, a stupid imitation of what you might have had. It was a straight issue, wasn't it? You took your way. I'll take mine."

"Does that mean you are marrying Potter?" said Lauder in a husky undertone.

"Why should I not?" she said. "Why should I not follow your example? Perhaps you have taught me, too, how to be prudent. Perhaps *I* am tired of debts and difficulties; all that I used to find amusing. As you did. You decided it wasn't worth while, Bill. Why shouldn't I?"

He brought his horse so near that his arm brushed her shoulder.

"Sophia——" he said, and stammered some wild proffer that the turbulence of his feeling

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brought out before he knew it. Formerly they had stood by each other, had shared each other's winnings——

"Why," she said, "I believe the man is offering his wife's money to me!"

Her disdain struck him silent.

There was no loyalty in the man. In his extremity he had grasped selfishly at his chance of salvation without more than a passing sense of guilt towards the woman whose hold upon him was too weak to stand against his need. He saw nothing despicable in his action. Other men did the same; other women acquiesced.

But Sophia had not acquiesced. She had refused to see in his marriage a mere incident, an expedient to be understood, to be excused and forgotten. It was not he who had thrown her over; it was she who, stronger than he, had loosed him.

That was the thing that rankled, that filled him with a furious admiration. He had not realised until she let him go what she had meant in his life, what a spell she had laid on him. Barred, despised, her scorn of him fired his old infatuation, and he would have liked to fawn upon her like a tamed wild beast. If Sophia Bland, the heartless, the

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indifferent, had asked the gods for vengeance, she had it in her hands.

"You shall be friends with me yet," he said. "I'll make you."

"You can try," said Sophia.

They had turned out of the byway into a wider lane running westward, and the hush was interrupted by a weird pattering as the pack came up with them and passed, mud-stained, dim in the twilight, disappearing like phantoms. The horn was sounding its last long-drawn, mournful note, calling to the lost.

The woman quickened her horse's gait, joining the faithful followers who had stayed to the end. The man fell back brooding sullenly on what had robbed him of her.

CHAPTER VI

THE Babes had called in to ask Gay's advice.

There were two of them, and they were cousins, one the son of an admiral, and the other the son of an Indian judge. Having both failed to pass into the Woods and Forests they had fled from the crammers and were trying an experiment of their own. They had brought to the adventure all that ardour that schoolboys put into robbers' camps. To squat in the midst of civilisation was a bigger joke than to do the same in an unsympathetic prairie barren of lookers-on. True, there were objections. You had to keep up your fences, and you were open to the risks of being pounced upon by curious relations who popped in on you without warning, and were eloquent with horror at your goings on.

They had to farm. Gold-mining would have been more congenial, but it could not

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be done in this locality. So they had set up an iron habitation in the centre of their experimental acres, and Stokes had fixed a broomstick on the roof, partly to act as a flagstaff, and partly to show that it was not a mission-room.

"If the flag is up," he explained to the public, "we are visible to callers. If it isn't, we are not presentable, and the ram is loose."

The ram was not a myth, but a ferocious guardian that Pinner had bought, quite by accident, in the market. It was their one protection against a prying world. Before his coming they had been liable at any moment to a domiciliary visit from the aunt who financed them; now she wrote first, announcing her intention.

"And that's a blessing," said Pinner with profound thankfulness, when pouring out their woes to Gay. "Do you know, she came down upon us like the wolf on the fold at ten o'clock in the morning. And there was I in my pyjamas letting out the fowls; you *must* keep fowls, or how are you to encourage foxes? and poor old Stokes washing up the dishes under the pump, and using Admiralty language because the grease wouldn't come

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off; we hadn't found out then that bacon fat cleaned itself up if you dipped the pigs in hot water. I can tell you that discovery——! Well, Stokes dropped the plates and ran for his life to turn out the horses."

"—For you see," said Stokes, "they were supposed to be cows."

"—And drove them into one of your fields," said Pinner. "So that when we took her round the stables we could explain that we always let them out after milking. She didn't go down to the pasture to prod them with her umbrella. I wonder at that. But it was a narrow escape."

"It was bad enough as it was," said Stokes. "She was awfully distressed at our doing our own washing and all the real things. She can't understand the laws of the game. She said: 'Do try to live like Christians,' and she was so sorry for us she sent down her delicate butler, Johnson, who was told he'd a weak chest and must live a gipsy life, to do the housework and keep us up to our dignity. I don't complain of his cooking, but I do object to his going about from morning to night reproaching us with his clean face and his black tails."

"It's perfectly awful," chimed in Pinner,

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"the way he clings to that old dress-coat. We did all we could think of to beguile him into other clothes. He says she made him swear never to leave it off, for our sakes, to be a check on our barbarous habits."

There was an artlessness about Stokes and Pinner. They were both stout young men with stubbly fair hair and ingenuous faces, and a great capacity for boyish make-believe. They were much alike, except that Pinner always had a surprised look and Stokes owned a bit of a moustache. They were known as the Babes because of their artlessness, and because their innocence was always being imposed upon. Anybody who had a screw to dispose of considered them legitimate spoil, and their appearance in Melton market was good for trade.

For Gay's opinion they had a superstitious reverence. He had helped them out of a good many difficulties, and it was their custom to apply to him for counsel whenever anything went wrong. By dint of following him about and asking him questions they had acquired some knowledge of a rudimentary description. It was against the laws of their game to indulge in hired assistance, but, thanks to the aunt's subsidy, they carried it on

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gaily ; hunted enthusiastically on the queer animals they picked up, and in their serious moments worked with a feverish activity that was too good to last.

They stood rather in awe of Tokenhouse, but Gay they worshipped. And now they waited in his room buried in two chairs, disconsolate until, at the sound of his step in the passage, their gloom was lifted.

"Thank goodness !" said Pinner. Stokes poked the fire and pulled out the chair he had been sitting on for the master of the house, while Pinner, equally at home, carried the teapot into the kitchen himself to secure a fresh supply of tea. Then they sat metaphorically at his feet.

"Look here," said Pinner. "What on earth are we to do ?"

"What have you done ?" said Gay.

"It's not our fault," protested Stokes, "but we can't see any way out of it. We hoped you would. It's come on us like an earthquake. Oh, the pig's all right ; we're getting used to him grunting when he is out of temper. We thought feeding him would do Johnson good, bring him down to our level, but he says it wasn't in the bond, so we'll have to sell him."

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"We're in a devil of a hole," said Pinner.
"It's all the aunt."

"She's got mixed up with journalists," said Stokes lugubriously. "Been hobnobbing with newspapers——"

"And she's been bragging to them of how we're nobly demonstrating that there's no occasion to clear out Britain's extra sons, and that we're an object-lesson to British parents—colonising the desolate spots of our native land. You know the kind of thing. And they are turning the eye of the world upon us. She says so. What the dickens are we to do?"

"We can't keep them out," said Pinner.
"The ram's nowhere, butting against the power of the Press. They'll make us notorious all over the kingdom."

"And besides, there's the aunt," said Stokes.

"She's awfully cock-a-hoop. If we go and disgrace her after all her crowing, she'll cut off supplies. Just think what fools we shall look! They're coming down in a body to take notes. We'll see ourselves pilloried in the daily papers——"

They looked at Gay.

"What's to be done?" groaned Pinner.

"I am afraid," said their counsellor, trying

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to illustrate their solemnity, "you'll have to shut it out."

"But they're making it a matter of national importance," urged the dismal Stokes. "They'll photograph every inch of the ground and the live and dead stock. I say, I'll never forget the first time I went to an auction and found out that wasn't corpses, but ploughs and harrows——!"

"You see," said Pinner, "we haven't been very lucky. We are having a healthy time on the whole, but it wouldn't look grand on paper. How can you make a cold-blooded Special Commissioner, or whatever the monster's called, see that a few nags are cheaper and more suitable to us than a lot of cows that catch cold and disseminate consumption? There's something queer about all our animals except that flock of Highland sheep, and nothing will keep *them* in one place two nights together. They'd go through a brick wall like Mahatmas rather than stay on exhibition. We spend our lives hunting them——"

"That's what we have to keep horses for," suggested Stokes. "We might say so, if they'd believe us."

They ceased, looking at Gay in comical despair.

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"I'll come round to the Tin House in the morning," he said, "and see what's to be done."

The Babes brightened immediately, as if a load had been taken off them.

"Thanks, awfully," said Pinner. "Let's go home, Stokes; we mustn't waste any time. We ought to clean up for inspection."

But still they loitered.

"There's another thing," said Stokes. "It doesn't matter really. But you know those people who hunt from the house in the hollow? We can sit on our doorstep and smoke down their chimneys. . . . The man's called Lauder."

"Yes," said Gay, in a changed voice.

"Well, the sheep are awfully keen on them—I mean on the yew tree in their garden. It says in the dictionary that yew is poison, so last night we had a presentiment, and we rushed down the hill and found the entire flock rummaging in there. Of course, Pinner and I went through the hedge after them, and we had a great hunt."

"It *was* sport, you know," acknowledged Pinner. "Pitch dark, and these black-faced fiends darting about braying or barking or whatever it's called, and us tumbling in all

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directions grabbing at their wool. But Lauder came out and swore at us like a trooper."

"We didn't mind that," said Stokes, "we're used to it. He should hear the farmers——! And, of course, it was late, and it was a bit too like the Hippodrome. But the man was drunk."

"He flung open that long French window," said Pinner. "It made a big sweep of light, like a theatre. And *she* was there; his wife, you know. He'd been terrifying her. You could see that. She had been crying."

"She was alone with him in the house," said Stokes, "except for the servants, and they were miles off, at the other end; they never even heard us making that hullabaloo."

"We'd have to be blind and deaf," said Pinner, "not to see the way he treats her. Jeering and sneering at her, and sending her out on half-broken brutes of horses, hoping she'll break her neck! She's too frightened of him to resist——"

"I wouldn't talk about it," said Gay; his own voice was hard. The Babes stared reproachfully at his averted face, misunderstanding, thinking him unsympathetic.

"We are only telling *you*," said Stokes, "and if we held our tongues we should burst."

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We're not libelling him. Do you think it would be cheek on our part if we called on her and apologised for the row we made, and asked her to look upon us as totally at her service any time she wanted support? As neighbours?"

Stokes was the more deliberate of the two. He spoke with a slight pause before he began a sentence, not owing so much to his wisdom as to some professor's stern endeavour to cure him of a stutter. Mechanically he counted twenty before he brought out a word.

"Yes; can't we do that?" said Pinner.

They waited for Gay's approval.

"I suppose you can," he said heavily.

The Babes could not understand his manner. It damped their enthusiasm, puzzled them. They stared at his back disconcerted.

"We'll be very discreet," said Stokes. "We shouldn't dream of saying to her: 'Count on us to protect you against your husband.' But still, we are handy. She might like to feel she had—friends within call."

"If you had seen her face last night——!" said Pinner.

Gay interrupted him.

"Oh, do as you like," he said. It struck them that he was harassed by a trouble out-

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side their ken, and they considerably decamped.

Gay heard them tramping out the back way, making their unceremonious exit, and when the house was again quiet he looked round him stupidly, missing their prattle, as one might miss a dog, his companion, whose disturbing fuss broke into unhappy thoughts. There was to-night no satisfaction in his bachelor ease, in the blessed liberty that allowed him to cast off his boots right and left, and meditate in comfortable undress, his chair drawn up to the fire, scorching his shins and sinking into sleepy content.

No. He saw too much in the fire ; burning visions.

He got up suddenly and went to seek his lodger.

The house was run on primitive lines, with a simplicity that suited both men, neither particular. A man and his wife did the housework : the man a born cook, the woman an incorrigible cleaner, and although they quarrelled perpetually, as is the wont of married couples in service, it was but relaxation. Periodically Crow ran away from his wife's tongue, and Mrs. Crow did his work with

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injured zeal, just, as she said, "to learn him." Invariably at the week's end he unostentatiously walked into the kitchen and began to peel potatoes. Mrs. Crow in her turn imitated him, but he, not sustained by a high-and-mighty sense of his wrongs, used to take an afternoon off on the third day to make his peace with her and fetch her back. Their bickerings kept the lamp of service alight with a rivalry that scorned to admit either indispensable to the house or each other, and sometimes the first intimation Gay received of a flare-up in his establishment was the sight of his man returning triumphantly of an evening up the lane, with his truant wife and her bundle hanging on his arm.

He had an idea to-night that it was Crow who was absent, by reason of a fitful hymn-singing in the kitchen, and the significant fact that the swinging lamp in the hall was unlit. It was a thing Mrs. Crow could not achieve, since it was a matter of inches, not unconquerable spirit, and even by standing on a chair she could not reach it, being but half her husband's size. She hated that lamp as she hated the library, which was a forbidden room to her, and which she was only able to turn out by stratagem. Her

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displeasure in that was translated into her manner with Tokenhouse, whose private haunt it was ; and she was accustomed to infuriate her husband, who valeted him and believed there was nobody like him, by calling him "*the poor gentleman*," with a shake of her head.

Gay made for the line of light in the crack of the library door and went in.

Tokenhouse was not like other men. You did not mind him seeing you as you were, without a mask, with the signs of turbulent unhappiness—yes, unhappiness, call it what it was!—plain to read. An absent-minded onlooker, impartial, with no blood in him ; what did it matter how much you let him know ?

"Did the Babes get you ?" said Tokenhouse. "They came up to pour out new troubles. They did not want me. They have an idea that I am cracked, and cannot give sound advice."

He stretched himself, turning over the papers in front of him with a long, thin hand before laying them down as one might affectionately put aside an absurd, but engrossing, toy.

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"I have a great fancy to preach this stuff," he said. "I asked my cousin, the bishop, if he couldn't make it convenient to turn me loose in a pulpit. I put it to him that it was rather ridiculous to appoint babes and suckings to lecture us on matters they know not of. He told me pompously that even these grew up, and became in time as bald as prophets. 'What's the advantage of that,' I said, 'so long as you pluck them young?'"

He smiled at the recollection.

"I took a lot of pains," he said meditatively, "to convince my cousin. Do you know I went round his diocese collecting statistics—putting down the subjects these innocents took for discourses. It was an imposing list. And I offered to give an undertaking not to meddle with theology, but only to deal with matters within my province. . . . He could not see it. Said he did not want people to come to church for secular information. . . . Said I was too well known. Which was just the point. They'd know I wasn't condemning wickedness as an ignorant amateur."

He looked over to Gay with the tolerant air of one who bore with the shortsightedness of his neighbours.

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"Well," he said, "it was a disappointment. There's some fine rhetoric in these sermons—and it's lost on a sinful world. Odd how we always pine to be celebrated in ways we cannot. . . . As I lay on my back a year or two ago the pulpit notion took a great hold of me. You were not in the humour for the Babes to-night ? "

He dropped his tone of languid reminiscence quite abruptly.

"I was not," said Gay.

He took a turn down the room, a big, untidy chamber stacked with books, the accumulation of many years, and smelling of Russia leather. Its peaceful atmosphere made no appeal to him.

"I can't stand it," he burst out, without explanation.

"Don't do anything rash," said Tokenhouse quietly. "Don't do anything that would make it worse for her."

"They all know——" said Gay. "They all see it the same as I do. There isn't a soul ignorant of how things are. God ! Just to look at her, to think of how she's put herself under the heel of a man like Lauder. A ruined spendthrift, a man without one decent instinct, unfit to worship her on his knees—— ! "

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"Yes; he's all that," said Tokenhouse; "but she married him. I don't imagine a woman cares what a man is like if she is fond of him."

His speculative calm failed to steady the other man whose anger was beyond argument. He had been curbing it until it could no longer be controlled.

"I don't believe she liked him," he said. "You don't know her. . . . They worked on her with sophistries, pushed, persuaded her—I'll swear she didn't love him. I'll swear that if I had been in time——"

He broke off, startled at his own passion.

"I couldn't make you understand, Tokenhouse," he said less fiercely, but in a voice that carried tides of feeling, "what a thing it is to see a girl miserable, and to know that if you had had your chance, you could have made her happy. I'm not worth much, but I would have done that."

"I have a working knowledge of many problems," said Tokenhouse mildly. "I find I can understand."

Gay halted in his tramp up and down the room. His intimates, who knew him only as a good man to hounds and one who could always be counted on in a sporting enterprise,

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would scarcely have recognised in him the careless individual who took himself no more seriously than did his world.

"If she were not so precious——" he muttered. There was a reckless light in his eyes and a smile that was defiance, strange on his humorous mouth.

"Ah," said Tokenhouse more gravely, dropping into the impersonal note that characterised all allusion to his own experience—he always spoke of himself as if he were telling stories of a man who was dead—"I ran off with a lady once. It killed her. . . . I am glad you understand that she is too precious. . . . You cannot help her. Let her fight her own battle, Gay; if I am not mistaken she is brave enough."

"She is so young," said Gay. "She has not a friend to stand by her; not a woman. Oh, they are kind to her and all that; they are sorry for her in a curious, lukewarm way. But they do nothing. I tried to frighten Maria. I said: 'Look what you have done!' and she brazened it out and said no good ever came of interfering between married—married, good Lord! when she brought it about herself, when it's a mockery and a sham!"

"Don't you be too hot a champion," said

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Tokenhouse. "You'll turn the women against her, Gay, if you're not careful. And you don't want that; you don't want to hurt her."

"No," said Gay. "I'll leave it to her husband."

It was true, though he raged against it in angry hopelessness. He could do nothing that would not hurt her. Tokenhouse need not bring out his cold-blooded logic to make that clear.

"You're a fish, a philosopher," he reproached him. "*You* can't feel the cruelty of it all. She wasn't made to be unhappy, Tokenhouse. She was like a butterfly for the sun to shine on——"

Tokenhouse listened to him unmoved.

"I am an old woman," he said. "A safe acquaintance. There is no reason why I should not do what I can to look after her. I'll talk to Maria. But if I were you, I should keep out of Lauder's house."

"There is no danger of my crossing his threshold," said Gay. "I had better tell you—you'll probably hear it from others—what sent me home half mad. Oh, yes, I made a raging fool of myself! I'm that sort."

He began tramping up and down the room again, shamefaced, but unrepentant, reddening

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under his tanned skin, like a boy who had done wrong and was glad of it.

"The man was in a black temper this afternoon," he said. "Sophia Bland had snubbed him. And when we got our second horses, the one he had ordered out for her was that pulling chestnut. She can't hold him. She knows she can't, and that shook her nerve. We all came down to the brook below Melton Spinney—you know what a pace you want to come there—I called out to her to come on, but she didn't understand, and I saw her try to turn him away to the ford. And Lauder came along buzzing like seven devils and shouted she was to jump; she wasn't to spoil the horse. That was rubbish, it was pure tyranny; he knew that she was afraid. I looked over my shoulder——" And now his voice shook with the anger that had burned up into recklessness.

"He had got a cutting whip," he said, "and he leaned out and slashed at the chestnut. It swerved and snatched at the bit, rushed down like a whirlwind, right on into the water."

He stopped, commanding himself to speak.

"He and I came over side by side," he said. "Another man who had landed as she went

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in was off and helping her up the bank. She was pale with the fright, and dripping. . . . And Lauder began railing at her. I could not stand it. I just cried at him : ' You bruce, if I catch you bullying your wife again, I'll kill you.' Hounds were in the spinney ; everybody had stopped ; it was public enough !—and some of them flung themselves between us. I don't know if I hit him first. . . . All I know is, he was never as near a horsewhipping in his life. Any man would have done as much."

" That is a matter of opinion," said Tokenhouse. And for all his passion Gay looked at him with a twinkle.

" I think I was very moderate," he said. " You'd have thrown him in the brook yourself."

" I don't know," said Tokenhouse very slowly.

CHAPTER VII

THERE were signs of unusual activity at the Tin House as Gay strolled across in the morning. The Babes, recovering somewhat from their first consternation, had worked out a plan of campaign.

The night had brought a frost, not severe, but enough to sharpen the air and lay a splintering film on the surface of the water in the dikes, and turn its trickle into a tinkle where it ran shallow. The wandering cattle left green tracks in the silvered grass. Gay swung himself over a fence artistically mended with a wooden chair thrust into a gap that was fringed with wool, its legs sticking out like guns pointed at the intruder, and passed from his own land into that of the pioneers.

Johnson, the representative of decorum, was standing outside the door of the three-roomed iron house, wearing his usual aspect of blank politeness—a small, pale man, knock-kneed but dignified to excess. He stepped

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forward with a boot in one hand and a blacking-brush in the other, as if the boot were a silver platter in which Gay might drop a card. The pig, soliciting favours, was rooting at his feet ; but that was to be ignored.

"The young gentlemen's up and out, sir," he said.

"Oh, well, I'll find them," said Gay. He could hear shouting not far off.

"Would you be so good as to ask Mr. Stokes, sir, if he could spare the kitchen table?" said Johnson with a deprecating cough. "The ram, he don't like me to go down yonder."

The Tin House was perched on the summit of a thimble-shaped hill. Gay had walked up one side and had now to go down the other. There was a bit of a plantation at the back, a few wind-sown trees ; and as Gay skirted it he beheld the Babes, with half their stud harnessed to a plough, turning up a pasture. Two or three specimens of natural history, unfortunate bargains, were standing in the middle—it was a small field—as upon an island, gazing.

"What on earth are you doing?" said Gay, running down to them.

"Splendid idea, isn't it?" said Pinner, leaving his horses in the furrow and joining

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him, wiping the sweat off his brow. "Here, Stokes, let's take a spell. It came to us in the night, and we borrowed this plough and started in before it was daylight. We mean to be caught at it; it looks so awfully agricultural."

"But why don't you clear off the stock?" said Gay. Pinner looked wise.

"That's where our practical minds come in," he said. "We'll explain to the Press it's our scientific farming—no waste. They are there to consume the grass till the last minute; and we're ploughing round and round, closing in on them."

"The horses take to it kindly," said Stokes. "Of course, now and then one of them gets tangled up in the tackle. It's lucky that none of them are finicking thoroughbreds."

He looked at his team with pride.

Their first independent action had been to buy a mixed draft of eleven rejected animals from the Army Remount depot. They were of all shapes and sizes, more or less blemished, and full of surprises in the way of tricks and temper; but they had been cheap. The Babes had filled their stables at the price of a single hunter.

Pinner looked at his watch.

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"We thought," he said, "you wouldn't mind receiving the enemy and taking him in tow. Give him a fine view of us at our work. You have a way with you, and we are ignorant sons of toil. There's been a telegram saying he's due at twelve . . . and another from the aunt saying England expects, et cetera."

"He'll like to inspect the Tin House," said Stokes. "We've hidden our easy chairs in the haystack. It looks more primitive without them. Ought we to invite him to eat bread and cheese under a hedge with a clasp knife?"

"We've told Johnson," said Pinner, "*he's* the blot on the landscape; that on pain of death he's forbidden to lay a cloth."

"That reminds me," said Gay, "I saw Johnson, and he was in trouble about a table."

The Babes looked at each other.

"It's those lawless sheep," said Pinner. "We wanted to pen them in for inspection; but last night we caught them wriggling through your hedge and we flew out and stuffed everything we could lay our hands on in the holes they'd made. And after all they did us after we'd gone to bed. They're invisible; they may be anywhere within a radius of twenty miles."

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"Oh, by the way," said Stokes, "were you attacked, coming down? I hope the ram hasn't drowned himself; he's so vain of looking at his reflection in the pond. It would be just like him to take offence and butt himself in the water. We let him loose to keep Johnson in the house. You see, we put his black coat in the haystack too as a temporary measure; it's so frightfully out of keeping."

"He'd be certain to get himself photographed in it with folded arms, propping up the shanty," said Pinner.

"Time's getting on," said Stokes; "let's go and coax the old beast in. He close. It wouldn't do to have him fretting the Press."

They started up the slope, leaving their scratch team standing in their tracks, and went in search of the ram, luring him cautiously into captivity.

"How my heart flutters," said Pinner, re-appearing blown with the chase. "Who's that coming?"

His eye travelled from the distant road to the hollow close underneath, and he seized hold of Stokes.

"Look!" he said.

A girl in a white frock was coming out from

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the trees that shut in the big house below. Behind her, in a confused army, helter-skelter, hurried the wicked Highland sheep.

"Witchcraft!" said Stokes, as overcome as his partner.

"Watch her," said Pinner; "she's bringing them up here."

She came with a running step, unconscious of the three figures gazing at her—bareheaded but warm in her white woollen dress—luring on the missing flock, now and then turning and shaking something at them till they quickened their pursuit, following her in rushes, a huddle of tossing grey.

Stokes and Pinner bowed down before her. Their manner had just that touch of awe that, when gods and men were familiar, might have informed an Olympian shepherd thanking an intervening goddess. And Judy laughed.

"These are your treasures, I think," she said, panting. "I don't know where they have been, but they appeared suddenly in the garden. I saw them from my window, all nibbling at the yew."

"Suicidal mania," said Stokes. "Will the perverse little beasts be seized with giddiness and disgrace us?"

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"I don't think so," said Gay. "Give them a feed and they'll probably stay a bit. They can't have had enough yew to poison them."

"That was how I charmed them," said Judy. "I made the men give me a bag of corn at the stables. Please, they must not be disappointed after following it so far."

The Babes sprang obediently to drag out the feeding-troughs (likewise thrust into the riddled hedges), and Judy, stooping, shook out the corn she had carried into them and watched the little sheep struggling and gobbling at her feet, with a quaintly tender smile.

"I wonder how long they could entertain themselves munching?" said Stokes; and Pinner, inspired with the idea of detaining them thus, started off to procure a further supply. "We're eternally obliged to you, Mrs. Lauder. We're expecting the London papers."

He glanced at Gay for help in expounding their plight, and Gay, for the first time daring to accost her, was steadied by the quietness in her face. Yesterday had not changed her. . . . She faced him, the man who had rashly proclaimed himself her defender, with the same trusting confidence. His wild outburst

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had not marred with strange thoughts a comradeship that had been instinctive. She smiled at him as she always used, as at an understanding friend.

"Am I to explain?" he said. "It seems that these two unlucky fellows have made themselves conspicuous. They are anxious to cut a decent figure before the representatives of the Press."

"That's why we are trying to assemble our flocks and herds," put in Stokes. "The aunt would disown us if we disappointed her and were published broadcast as a horrible example."

Judy was thinking. She looked at the Babes, quite serious.

"Ah," she said, "you must give them a champagne luncheon."

"Oh, my, what an inspiration!" said Pinner. "Wouldn't it seem unnatural? And how about the champagne?"

"I'll send you up some," said Judy. "I'll tell the butler."

The Babes suggested that they should run and fetch it, and darted down the hill.

"Won't you sit down?" said Gay, with the outward lightheartedness that was his armour against himself.

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"Thanks," she said in the same spirit. "I accept your empty offer. Where?"

The sheep had licked the last oat out of the nearer trough, and he turned it over.

"It's not much of a throne," he said.

She sat down gravely, leaning her chin on her hand, gazing down at the valley. The sparkle died in her eyes.

Gay could not look at her, could not bear to watch the sadness that was coming round her mouth as the pink flush of excitement faded and her smile went. He had an odd feeling that she liked him standing near, that his inarticulate longing of protection reached her somehow; that her heart wanted it . . . simply . . . as a child, unhappy, might feel in the dark for the warm clasp of a playmate's hand.

For a time she said nothing; and as he could not look at her, neither could he speak to her without danger. He would have liked to ask her pardon for his ill-judged intervention, the blunder of a man who had forgotten himself and was ashamed and sorry. But the words that would have come choked him.

There was no wind stirring, not a rustle in the still sharpness of the air. To breathe it was like drinking in spring water. It

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was misty on the horizon, and the land was as quiet as if enchanted. He heard her catch her breath in a sigh; that broke his silence.

"I wish I could—do something for you," he said, losing hold on himself.

"Why?" she said. He had to look at her then, to meet her eyes, lifted bravely. "Because you think I am not—always—happy? I never asked to be happy; it's not what we are for, you know."

Yesterday was between them; it was not any longer possible to pretend that all was right with the world.

"Yes . . . but that it should be you . . .!" said Gay.

"I don't think," she said, "that I have a bigger claim on happiness than another. Some of us have to suffer, and I would rather — Oh, you know the ones who cry out only want others to suffer for them."

It was like her. Gay could have smiled if he had been less bitterly conscious of his own impotence. And she went on talking in pauses, a vague, womanly understanding running through her wistful girlishness. The atmosphere was tragic and silence was not any longer safe. . . . Perhaps she guessed

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that ; perhaps she was nervous, alone with the man who had thrown himself unwarranted on her side.

"People who want everything," she said, "are too grasping. I think we are only meant to be kind to each other—not to fight for ourselves, to be greedy for ourselves. The worst is, when trying to help, you hurt somebody instead. I'm afraid I . . . tried too blindly . . . and so, if I'm not . . . happy, it's only because of my own mistake. It would be cowardly to complain."

And then she looked up at him and her breath came a little hurried.

"Will you let me ask you something," she said. "You won't misunderstand me—you won't be angry ? I . . . like you so much."

"Anything in the world," said Gay.

He did not want her eyes to fall before his ; he did not want her to falter. Surely he could be a true man and let her keep one friend ?

"Only," said Judy, turning paler, "to promise . . . that you won't be too kind . . . to me."

The panting Babes were coming back, each with a green bottle under his arm, full of

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gratitude and excitement, metaphorically and all but literally falling at Judy's feet. It was more of a joke than ever, this threatened visitation that had at first plunged them into stupid panic, and they implored Mrs. Lauder to remain and preside at the show. But she would not, and they gave her a private view of their possessions and finally escorted her down the hill.

"Isn't she wonderful?" said Pinner, who had handed her through the hedge. "*He's* gone up to London; that's how she can breathe and laugh and look as if she wasn't crushed. I've told her if ever she wants us to lend a hand—I didn't say what for—left that to her imagination!"

"What did she say?" asked Stokes jealously, having plotted the speech himself.

"Oh, shook hands upon it, and said if the house went on fire we might stand up here and throw water on the roof. Oh, Lord, look at the horses; they've all been and unyoked themselves from the plough——!"

Lauder was coming down from London by the last train, and Judy was listening for him, accusing herself for the dread in her expectation. He liked her the less for her

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fear of him. But she could not teach herself not to shrink from unkindness as if it were a blow.

It had been such pathetic folly, her marriage to him; a hasty impulse of dazzled pity. Was it her fault if she could not make him forgive her the humbling largesse that straightened his ruined path? He had caught despairingly at the straw and, saved, turned, venting his humiliation on the slight thing to whom he owed so much. The injury was that he should owe it to *her*.

She could do nothing to efface his brooding scorn of her, a resentment that charged her with the thwarting of his one real passion and laid his own weakness, his own disloyalty on her shoulders. It was the man's nature, self-indulgent, unjust. With all his soul he hated the stumbling-block.

Judy had felt it from the first, afraid with the loneliness of a bird caught in the hand of a stranger. Always she had been shy with him, and that was fatal. If she had been of commoner clay, a hard, rich woman, a bargainer, ready to insist on her rights and maintain her quarrel, she would have been luckier. Probably Lauder would have respected her, sulkily acknowledged her his equal. A coarser

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woman, a railing woman, might have beaten him to his knees. . . .

Judy could only shrink, terrified, the first time his ill-humour towards her betrayed itself; and her look of wondering pain had angered him, increased his grudge.

She saw that others knew there was something wrong. People cast pitying glances at her, looked sometimes askance at Lauder, telling each other why. She heard the whispers go round, and she felt shamed.

And yesterday . . . ah, yesterday . . . !

Strangely enough she had not yet apprehended the inevitable gossip that might or might not pass over Gay's explosion as one of his characteristic deeds. Lauder's laugh afterwards had been ugly; but he had not said much. It was not on that account that she had spoken to her champion, nor altogether for his sake.

The recollection came back to her and made her tremble. She shut her eyes and locked her hands together, caught in its grip. The dim winter afternoon, the galloping horses, a man plunging down clumsily in his spurred boots to pull her up the rotten bank, encouraging her with gruff kindness whilst he looked with grim approval at Gay. *That Gay?*

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That, the good comrade Gay, whom she had never known angry . . . ?

"If I catch you bullying your wife again, you brute, I'll kill you!"

Why should it bring the colour into her cheeks, make her hands shake and her heart beat? Why should it make her feel almost safe, almost happy?

She fingered the pearls at her throat with unconscious tenderness. Ah, strange, absurd, vain mirage of happiness!

Outside the house whirled a motor. In another minute Lauder would have come in.

"If I catch you bullying your wife——"

How the words rang in her ears. . . . She rose to go and meet her husband and wondered why she was not afraid.

There was a mirror between her and the door, and she saw her face in it and saw that she was smiling. Surely she must be mad.

The thrill passed, leaving her faint as she understood why, not all for his sake, and not at all for the world's opinion . . . she had asked Gay not to be too kind to her.

CHAPTER VIII

TOKENHOUSE, sauntering into the house on the following Sunday afternoon, was saluted by a prevailing scent, not tobacco. He stopped on the threshold sniffing, but failing to identify it stepped gingerly through the hall to the kitchen to reconnoitre.

Mrs. Crow's pinched look of virtuous reprobation showed that she too smelt it, French and mysterious, in her nostrils.

"Who is the lady?" said Tokenhouse. A strong whiff floated down the passage.

"She's calling on you, my lord," said Mrs. Crow reproachfully. "I been singin' hymns when she strit into the house unknown to me, and come in here and asked for you. I told her you was gone to church."

"Good," said Tokenhouse, chuckling at her expression. "What is she like?"

"One of them hunting madams," said Mrs. Crow.

Tokenhouse retired slowly, locating the

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visitor by his nose, and found her in the library. His countenance changed as he saw who it was.

"Who did you take me for?" said Maria.

"Upon my honour," said Tokenhouse, "I was all at sea. I could not imagine what alarming enchantress had deposited herself in this quiet house. That scent of yours is enough to compromise an angel."

"Do you notice anything?" said Maria, annoyed.

"Certainly," said Tokenhouse; "that was how I smelt you out."

"Extraordinary!" she said. She took off her furs and cast them from her.

"They belonged to that Russian baroness who poisoned herself," she said. "I bought them at the inquest—I mean the sale. I've drenched them in eau-de-Cologne, and still they reek of that kind of person. Dicky hates me to wear them; he calls it callous——"

"You women rejoice in a convenient want of imagination," said Tokenhouse. The furs were slipping to the floor, and he hung them over the back of a chair, handling them with a queer gentleness. The perfume had not been altogether strange to him; he remembered. . . . "At least, that is how we

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try to excuse you the fluff and feathers your devilish vanity makes you stick on your heads."

"You talk as if I had had her killed," said Maria peevishly. Tokenhouse shrugged his shoulders.

"You bring an uncanny atmosphere into this humdrum house," he said. "Suggestions of tragedies. How pleasant you cannot feel it." Sarcasm was wasted on Maria. It only brought a look of perplexity to her meddling, but not unkindly, face, with its prying nose and its domineering chin, already double.

"Sit down," she said. "I have come to consult you. Talking of tragedies——! Shut the door, please, in case that crazy house-keeper strikes up in the middle. She has been shrilling pious profanity at me for the past half-hour. What possessed you to go to church?"

"I was escorting Mrs. Lauder," said Tokenhouse. "I suppose you know Gay is out somewhere. Shall I order tea?"

"Do nothing of the kind," said Maria. "Dicky is coming for me at four. I told him I had to talk secrets with you. We are wretched in our new house; no room for ourselves, and yet he can't be parted from his stuffed beasts, and I have to squeeze into my bedroom

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dodging a lion's paw. Oh, Tokenhouse, for heaven's sake do sit down! You look so long and thin and spidery and unfeeling. What *am* I to do about my cousin Judy?"

Tokenhouse sank into his deep chair and began to roll a cigarette, thoughtfully staring at the golden-brown furs that she had discarded. Ah, that scent . . . and the woman. . . . His gaze was reminiscent.

"You anticipate—tragedy?" he said.

Maria made a gesture of helplessness.

"It is incomprehensible," she said, "how all my marriages turn out badly. I can't remember one that hasn't been a disappointment. Except my own, and I had nothing to do with that. Poor Dicky is so pig-headed. Nothing would induce him to look at the nice widow I had in my eye for him—suited to him in every way. When I pointed it out to him he coolly proposed to me. Would do it; and took me so by surprise. . . . Really, if I were a superstitious woman——"

She paused and looked distressfully at Tokenhouse.

"I introduced Eva to her husband," she said, "and she's divorced. And Harry Larkin, who met his wife at my house, was eaten up by a bear. And poor Susie, Susie who married

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millions, is semi-detached ; and Roddy Pim is in a lunatic asylum—sunstroke. And now there's Bill. *I* gave him a chance to pull up ; *I* rescued him from Sophia. Dicky says the way he behaves to his wife is a scandal ! ”

“ What do you want me to do ? ” said Tokenhouse, interrupting her list of casualties.

“ It is such a comfort talking to you,” said Maria. “ You are so safe, so outside all that. . . . I want you to help me to smooth things over, to look after Judy, and prevent your friend Gay from making her conspicuous. After that disgraceful tale of his threatening Bill in the hunting-field, one feels that anything might happen.”

“ I see,” said Tokenhouse. “ You wish me to be a harmless damper on Gay's chivalrous hotheadedness, and to watch unostentatiously over another man's wife ? It's hardly my place, you know.”

“ You are the only person who could,” said Maria hastily. She was a schemer whose ingenuity was exhausted in bringing the wrong people together, and who was always bewildered by her catastrophes. “ A woman can't do much, and Dicky has no influence whatever with any one but himself. *You* won't lose your head.”

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Tokenhouse blew a thin cloud of smoke and watched it fading.

"As you suggest, it seems to be my appointed role," he said, "but you come too late. My dear woman, I have been doing nothing else for weeks."

"Thanks awfully," said Maria immediately, and rose as if her business had been concluded. "Is that Dicky?"

Tokenhouse stood up and looked towards the window, crossing the room, with his cigarette in his fingers.

"That," he said, "is not the grinding of Dicky's car. I rather think it's another lady coming to favour me."

Mrs. Burkinshaw snatched up her furs as the notes of a high, lazy voice floated in to her ears.

"Sophia Bland," she said. "Really, Tokenhouse——!"

"You had better stay and chaperon us," he said. "I assure you I wasn't expecting either of you, so I am blameless."

"I——" began the British matron, but forbore further justification. The hoot of Burkinshaw's motor made it easy for her to depart with the honours of war, and a haughty salutation to the invader sailing unconcernedly up the steps.

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"Has Maria fled before me? How flattering," said Sophia Bland. "Open the window, for heaven's sake. She must have been wearing her haunted furs."

She sat down in the chair Maria had vacated, untwisting her vivid green scarf.

"I saw Gay riding out to lunch," she said casually, "and so the infant and I walked up to have tea with you. Baby, run and help the lady in the kitchen; she'll let you make toast, I'm sure."

Fanty, an imp in scarlet, vanished, but not to join Mrs. Crow. She took possession of the dining-room, persuaded the dogs she found sprawling on the hearth to form a congregation, and played at being two preachers, popping in and out of rival pulpits, like a small conjurer. A habit of doubling herself in all her games was her expression of an undefined loneliness.

"This is good of you," said Tokenhouse.

"Don't look so alarmed," said Sophia. "I have not come to make terrible confidences. . . . We used to be great pals, Tokenhouse, before your accident, before you dropped out of things."

"Yes," he said, in a non-committal tone.

She glanced lazily round the room. Al-

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though she gave an impression of a large, lazy, good-natured woman, her eyes, generally half shut, had hidden fire in them. As far as Tokenhouse could remember she had never played on him her dangerous sidelong glances. There was no earthly reason why she should do it now.

"I see you have Peppermint's portrait up there," she said, "sandwiched between two of Gay's family gods. He was a good horse. Do you remember that other day I had tea with you? The day I lost my party at some ridiculous country meeting, where you had ridden Peppermint—and we both missed the train back and sat for three hours drinking hot tannin and hugging the fire in a dreadful public-house—and it rained and rained——!"

"Your dress was ruined," said Tokenhouse, "and the man you were flirting with had caught the train—with another—and you were raging, a thunderstorm in yourself. . . ."

"You remember too much," she said.

She leaned back in her chair with an affectation of languid amusement that did not impose on him.

"How comfortable you are in here," she said. "I always want to talk of old times

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when I stare into a fire like that. But isn't it rather a pity ? ”

“ What ? ” he asked.

“ To throw up everything,” said Sophia, “ to sink into a kind of hermit. You used to ride so magnificently, Tokenhouse. You never lost a race——”

“ Except the last,” he said significantly. Her impatience was diplomatic.

“ What does that matter ? ” she said. “ It's two years ago. You talk as if you were a hopeless cripple. It's not fair to yourself ; it gives people a wrong idea. The other day a man asked me if you were mad.”

“ I wonder,” he said, unmoved, “ what you told him.”

“ I told him,” said Sophia, meeting his look with an audacious frankness as she threw her cards on the table, “ that you were going to ride Slipper for me in the Point-to-Point.”

She waited. Across the hall the infant could be heard discoursing in an affected sing-song, interrupted by the collapse of one pulpit, and the delighted barks of the congregation.

Along the passage came a faint clattering of china.

“ My dear Sophia ! ” said Tokenhouse. “ I don't ride. I have forgotten how.”

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"Please!" she said. "I have set my heart on it. If you ride him I know he'll win. Don't talk nonsense. A man never loses his knack—a man like you."

She was coaxing him with assurance, used to carrying her way with a high hand.

"Let me feel your arm," she said. "There, what did I tell you? It's as hard as iron."

"Possibly," he said. "I do some eccentric exercises with dumb-bells occasionally; purely habit. It's no good, Sophia; you can't cajole me."

"Oh, but I must," she said. "I have set my heart on the thing. What a triumph!"

He laughed, not bitterly, but contemptuously, like a man acknowledging a weakness in himself.

"Don't you know," he said, "that I have lost my nerve, that the mere thought of a gallop across country makes me shiver? It sounds absurd, but it's the plain truth. It's a kind of disease, a neurotic obsession—anything you like. But, unfortunately, it is unconquerable. That spill shook me out of myself, made an old woman of me."

"And yet you can look on?" she said.

"Yes; I can look on. It is all I am fit for. Don't waste your arguments on a wreck. Ask

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somebody else. Ask"—his smile broadened—"your last admirer."

Her eyes flickered at him.

"Why don't you say——" she said, 'Ask Bill?'

"Because," he said, "you probably want to beat him."

"He can ride his wife's horses," said Sophia. "You are one of her partisans, aren't you? You think her an injured angel. Well, I gave him up to her. Let her keep him. . . . Only, if you won't do this for me, Tokenhouse——"

"What then?" he said, unshaken.

"Oh, I make no—promises," she said darkly.

Mrs. Crow was bringing in tea, followed by the infant, who scorned to sit at the oaken table and eat her bread and jam, but went and built herself two houses out of the largest books at the far end of the room. She had a cup and saucer in each, and visited from one to the other, her lank, flaxen head just visible above a rampart of stacked volumes, as she squatted chirping to herself.

Sophia possessed herself of the teapot. Her manner was softer, almost beguiling. She was not yet in despair.

"Talking of my admirers," she said. "I

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have thrown over the horse-tamer, as Lord Robert calls him. I really could not stand the wretch, and besides—I'll be honest—my rudeness palled on him after a while, and people told him tales. I am an exemplary creature, but so many of them hate me."

"You are a little careless," said Tokenhouse. "A little inclined to trample."

"And yet," she said, "I can be very nice to my—friends."

She looked almost handsome as she sat watching him, her hair puffed against the cushion, her face half serious, half jesting.

"Do you know," she said, "I am tempted to imitate Maria. Are you never included in her designs? To suggest that what you want is a wife, a stirring, amusing woman, who would shake you up and be good to you. Aren't you frightfully lonely, Tokenhouse, living in this odd way, pretending you are a fossil?"

"Not in the least," he said. "I have too many privileges. All you women look upon me as a tame cat, purring congenial advice and, when required, consolation. You don't take me too seriously."

"If you liked," said Sophia, with a significant pause, "we would!"

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"Ah," he said coolly, "but I know my limitations. I am not capable of entering into an offensive and defensive alliance with anybody, however kind she might be in making allowances. My dear Sophia——"

He waited, as if tasting the flavour of a joke that was his own pleasant property before sharing it with her. His curiously tired expression became, for once, almost brisk.

"Don't you remember," he said, "how shortly after that—accident, my kind relations endeavoured to have me declared—what is the polite word for imbecile? They swore that the crash had affected my head and left me helpless to look after my own concerns. I am afraid they made rather fools of themselves; they were a little too eager to step into my shoes. At least, the court would not entertain their application. I am pronounced sane and sober. That, of course, is a matter of opinion, and I contrive to keep mine to myself. It would be cruel to increase their disappointment. I remain my own master, but let them cling to their hopes of succession. No, I seem to have no inclination to accept your brilliant prescription. My dear Sophia, it wouldn't do."

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He shook his head at her slightly, dismissing an impossible idea.

"I suppose," she said;—there was pique in her voice, "you never remotely cared for a woman. And yet, at one time, I actually imagined——"

"I fancy strange things myself," said Tokenhouse, rather oddly.

For a moment his look was abstracted, almost wistful. He flicked the ash off his cigarette into the fire and laughed. "No—we are none of us safe. All the same, Sophia, many thanks for your kind intentions. I agree with you that it is a sad pity my infirmities won't allow me—to ride your horse."

She picked up her scarf and began twisting it round her neck.

"Having failed in our mission," she said—her voice had lost its laziness in chagrin—"we'll go."

Tokenhouse rose, putting aside his bantering lightness for a suddenly graver tone. Something in his attitude warned her. She was face to face with a queer sense of the unknown in him, and waited for him to speak, expecting she knew not what.

"Well?" she said nervously.

"If you wouldn't call it impertinent," he

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said, "I should like to ask you if you quite realise what you are doing to Lauder. You are driving him mad, Sophia."

"I?" she said. "I've behaved with most marvellous circumspection."

But her bold eyes dropped before his.

"I think we understand each other," he said very quietly. "You want to punish him, and you do it cleverly. You never let him alone—never let him forget; you tantalise him and turn on him with implacable scorn, keeping the fire alight. I don't know what devil taught you to madden a man like that——"

"I don't understand you at all," she said. "What can it matter to you?" Her eyes began to glitter.

"Only," said Tokenhouse, "because it falls heavily on his wife."

Sophia flung up her head and burst into discordant laughter, like an hysterical child.

"Oh," she said, "so that's it—that's it!"

She was not prepared to find in him another attitude than that to which she was accustomed; it was impossible to awaken him to action, to change him to suit her purpose. It was the more astonishing that he should seize her wrists, looking down upon her

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laughter with a tightened mouth and eyes that were like steel.

"Yes," he said; "that's it. Don't think either you or Lauder are worth considering except in so far as you trouble her."

Sophia Bland wrenched her hands free, at a loss to know why they trembled.

"So all the world is on her side!" she said.

Tokenhouse had recovered his equanimity. He looked into her startled face with all his former nonchalance.

"It is," he said. "Even I am roused. Hot-headed fellows like Gay are born to play knight-errant; but the position is serious when I go down the lists. I can't think how any woman can make another woman unhappy; it seems unnatural. You want all your strength to help each other. I can't understand how a woman can be a traitor. Can't you pretend to care a little for anybody but yourself?"

"If you expect me to love that girl——!" said Sophia. He interrupted her.

"I don't expect miracles," he said. "I am simply advising you that her unhappiness lies at your door. Don't make yourself answerable for too much."

"Preacher!" she said, and called to Fanty,

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who came unwillingly to wriggle into her coat. "Perhaps if I were a little puling thing with large eyes and a confiding smile you would champion my cause instead. I can't understand the infatuation that drives you men to lose your hearts as you do to the weakest of us. She can't hold a horse. . . . I've seen her turn pale, and the reins slipping through her fingers . . . and how can she hold a man? Oh, I am not jealous of her—heaven knows I have little cause! She bought him. As you say, I don't care for anybody—unless it's that infant. She's the only thing I have that can't be taken from me—not even by the bailiffs."

"Is it peace?" said Tokenhouse, holding open the door for her. "No doubt I have done more harm than good."

She smiled at him enigmatically.

"Oh, it is peace," she said. "I don't want to quarrel with you. One lets you say things because you are not an ordinary person. Only, Tokenhouse, it's pleasanter when you don't look as if you meant them. You took away my breath. . . . Of course, you have done more harm than good. What adviser with the best intentions ever did otherwise? You didn't even hold out a bribe——"

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She gave the last word meaning.

"I have nothing to offer," said Tokenhouse, "that would bid you hold your hand."

She went down the steps without looking back, and walked on towards the village with the infant dancing like a sprite in her train. It was scarcely dusk.

As became a Sunday afternoon in the country there were sweethearts abroad, hanging over the gates or marching in unabashed rustic fashion along the highway; the girl—if the swain were neglectful—advertising her property in him by walking with her hand on his shoulder. Sophia's lip curled as she passed, an object of awed attention to the pairs turning their heads to look after her.

All this love-making was a trivial pastime, contemptible, common, adding strangely to her fierceness of discontent. What fools there were in the world!

She had reached the bottom of the lane and was turning down to the village with Fanny running ahead, hurrying with childish eagerness to peer into the glimmering belt of trees that darkened the wayside, and held heaven knew what imaginary wild creatures—when she saw the man she was thinking of. It was not surprising that he should start

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up in her path as if her spirit had summoned him. Was he not always there, sulkily watchful for a shadow of relenting ?

"Are you going to speak to me," he said.

"I am not sure," said she.

He grasped at the slight concession and fell into step beside her.

"Oh," she cried at him then, "don't let us, of all people—moon side by side like a kitchenmaid and a groom !"

"Just as you like," said Lauder. "Ask me into your house if you don't want me to haunt your steps. Who is riding Slipper for you in the Point-to-Point ?"

"What do you know about him ?" she said. He braved her disdainful look stubbornly.

"How can I help it ?" he said. "I hear scraps."

"I have just been up to ask Tokenhouse," she said.

It was not too dusk to see him redden.

"Once," he said, "you'd never have dreamt of asking any one but me. Tokenhouse ? He can't ride."

"He says not," she said.

"He can't, I tell you. Let me ride the horse ; I know him. I've ridden him for you.

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ever since you had him. I believe if I saw another man up I'd——"

"*You* ride him?" she interrupted. "You forget, Bill, that we've washed our hands of each other. And I want my horse to win."

"I'll win on him," said the man.

His eye was dull, and his face looked bloated, but his voice was keen.

"I've not been steady lately, I know," he said. "Don't look at me like that. I'll pull up. Let me ride for you and I'll win his race, or break his neck and my own."

He waited for the inevitable taunt, the bitter check on his approach towards a forfeited intimacy. Did he not know just how this woman would turn on him, lashing him with her tongue? She was continually teaching him that he was shut out of her existence, too despicable in her eyes for more than a biting word. But the jealousy that consumed him at the thought of another man taking his place with her, riding the horse he knew, drove him to push his useless claim. Somehow this last trifle hit him harder than anything—made him mad.

The mocking refusal did not smite him as quickly as he expected, and he took an

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incredulous look at her. It was not possible that she was relenting. . . .

"I'll be generous, Bill," she said. "I'll let you ride him. But you needn't build on that. And mind, you are to win."

Amazement at the favour took all the sting out of her grudging grant. His voice was thick and his face darkly flushed as he swore that there should be no defeat.

"What is the infant doing?" said Sophia with astonishment. Fanty had arrived at the patch of firs and was executing a war-dance, inciting villains within to issue forth and be slain. Her challenge was pitched in an exulting key, and as she made little rushes at the place of mysterious darkness, something gleamed in her hand. At their approach she dived in among the firs.

"Baby, what is that you have got?" said Sophia sharply. The little shrill voice pealed out of the glimmer, behind a tree.

"I'm playing at a robber and a policeman. I took Lord Tokenhouse's pistol what he shoots at hawks."

"Good heavens!" said Sophia. "Bring it here, Baby!"

"Die, false hound!" hissed Fanty to the robber, paying no more attention.

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"The little wretch!" said Sophia. "She must have hidden it in her sash. It's sure to be loaded. Baby, baby, give it up!"

But Fauty, armed and irresistible, had sprung behind another tree and was defying the myrmidon of the law. She was the robber now, invincible in his den.

"She's got it by the right end," said Lauder.

"Take it away from her," said Sophia with a shudder.

Lauder plunged heavily over the ditch, in amongst the trees, pursuing the infant's eldritch laughter as she twisted invisibly, avoiding him. It was a dangerous game, until he caught her wrist, wringing the revolver out of her clutch.

"That was a real play," she panted, congratulating herself. She scrambled into the road after him, excited and utterly unrepentant.

"It's a miracle she didn't shoot it off," said Lauder. "I'll bet she knows how, the imp!"

Sophia caught Fauty's hand in hers, shaking her and then squeezing her to her side.

"You are a fiend, baby," she said. "Don't exhibit the horrible thing to me, Bill; it makes me ill to see it. She must have hunted it out and carried it off on purpose."

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Lauder slipped the revolver into his pocket. He was out of breath.

"I frightened you very much," said Fanty delightedly. "It was like being a true robber," and she sighed. "What's he going to do with my gun?"

"Give it back to Lord Tokenhouse," said Sophia. Unconsciously her voice had fallen into the old familiar accents. "Won't you, Bill?"

"There's no hurry," said Lauder. "I'm going on with you to the village."

"I don't see that," said the woman. "You can ride Slipper; I said so. And perhaps . . . if you win——!"

She left the rest ambiguous, but dismissed him.

CHAPTER IX

A THAW had come, and all the world was again in the saddle after an awful pause.

Instead of fractious processions of hooded and sheeted hunters, mincing by in the hard middle of the road, the lanes were awakened to the trotting of small parties of two and three. Horse and man turned up at the meets with the exuberant freshness of captives let out of school.

"I am looking forward," said Lord Robert, "to hearing the water squirt after us in the furrows. Delightful sound! All I ask of nature is a little rain, just sufficient to take the twist out of your moustache so that you can suck the ends and feel happy. It may be prejudice, but I cannot bear to see the country starched."

They were cantering down to Burbidge's. Hounds had been flirting wide in search of an outlier, and had already gone over higher up ;

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but the field was held back at the railway crossing to await the passing of an express. The man patrolling with a red flag jumped up on the gate to watch hounds go into the cover, with his back to the barred and impatient host. Smoke drifted in their faces, hanging low in the rainy atmosphere, blotting out Burbidge's from their view.

"Pah!" said Rafferty, wheeling his thick-set cob, who had indulged in no antics although pulled up with his nose at the white bars of the railway gate. "Hi, my man! Get down there, and let us through."

The man shook his head without turning it, his eyes glued to the pack sniffing among the badger earths in the old canal bank and finally disappearing into the evergreen mystery of the cover.

"Patience!" said Lord Robert, reproving him. "Do you want the down train to cut us all in pieces? I dare say the fox'll wait our convenience. Don't you like the taste of smoke? It swallows raw down your throat, but it's a sweet prognostic."

"Oh, you and your rain!" said Rafferty. "It's a treacherous thaw that comes with a drizzle; it won't last. Everything will be glazed to-night."

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"Hark to the pessimist," said Lord Robert. "He's thinking of the bumps he'll get on the north side of hedges. Haven't you found out yet that the ground is as soft as butter? Did you see Jordan with his pockets bulging with insurance papers? Wonderful thing the commercial spirit! He used to be an arrant little coward, and now it's fine to see him charging everything like a lion, fortified by the knowledge that if he's killed he stands to make two or three thousand pounds."

"Wish they hadn't made him an agent, though," grumbled Rafferty. "It casts a gloom over the landscape when he bustles into us at a meet, asking each man if he's insured. Why couldn't the man go into something lively, like wines and spirits?"

"Is that it?" said Lord Robert. "Why, when he rode up to me with his ingratiating smirk and began, I thought he was trying to be funny. Here, Jordan, they tell me you're genuine and don't mean to be insulting. Put me in for an accident."

The down train whizzed past, leaving the humming metals clear for them to pour across, and they pressed through and streamed over the two fields that parted them from the

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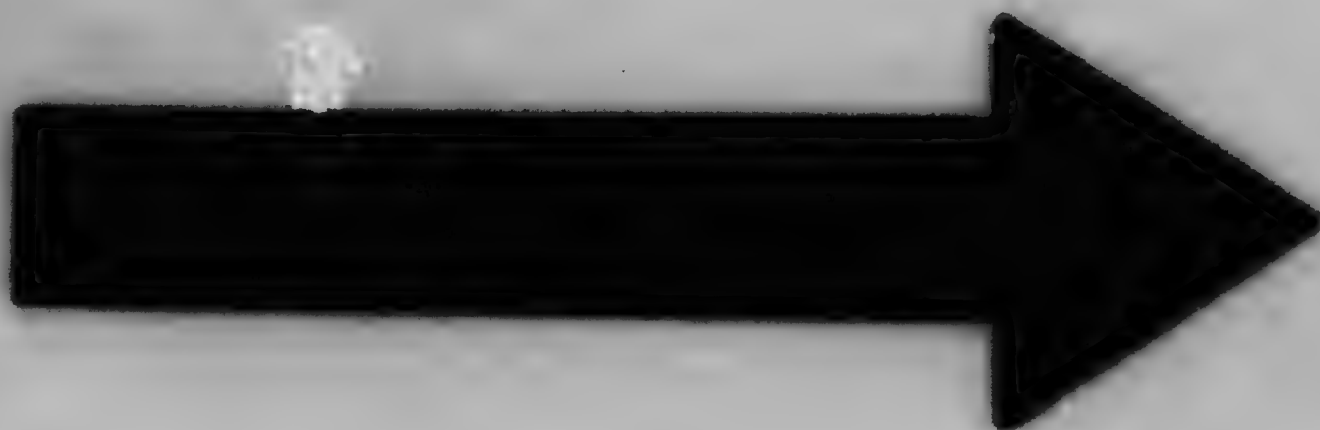
few who had crossed quickly with hounds and were now listening at the end of the cover.

"That's what I like about Burbidge's," said Lord Robert. "You're all in a bunch. You can take stock of each other and see who's out without missing anybody but the few lost souls who lie in wait afar on the other side of the river. It's a regular island; a moated kingdom. But I'm grieved to hear there's been a plague of nightingales in the summer. I hope the foxes weren't disturbed. Look at the Babes worshipping Mrs. Lauder. What's this I hear about them getting into the papers? What mischief have they been in?"

"Only setting an example to the rising generation," said Gay.

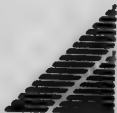
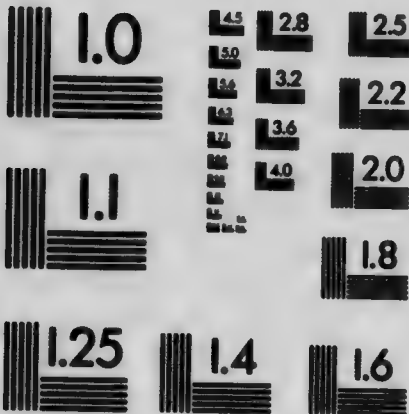
"Oh, that's why they look so elated," said Lord Robert. "Casual innocents! They've been getting in everybody's way this morning, pegging away on their rag-tag and bobtail and grinning at the universe. How are you, Gay; and where's old Tokenhouse? I miss him and his umbrella."

"He went away for a few days," said Gay. He was watching Judy. All the morning he had tried to keep far off, but surely now, when the world was penned into that sheltered



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corner, he might exchange a word with her, assure himself that it was well with her. . . .

"I suppose he is coming back for the Point-to-Point?" said Lord Robert. "He likes to look on at us, poor old chap. I hear you are riding Fanny, and"—his voice dropped slightly—"that you'll have Lauder to beat. He and Sophia seem to be reviving their old alliance. At least, they say she's made his winning on Slipper the price of her forgiveness. But they'll say anything. You'll have a tough struggle if it's true."

He measured Gay with his eye. It was an interesting speculation whether the feud between Gay and Lauder lay deep, or was a temporary flare-up. Its first manifestation had become historic, but Gay was just the sort of imprudent champion who would let an impulse run away with him. There might be nothing in it. The scandalous might snatch at the story and keep it alive, but the larger half was more charitable. Contrary to its custom of despising the woman whose wealth purchased her a tyrant, it liked and pitied Judy.

"I dare say," said Gay, absently. He moved up along the fence, steering in and out of the shifting crowd till he was near to her.

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Another woman was talking to her, and he fell into conversation with the Babes, her devoted satellites. There was no harm in that. And the rest of those about her chimed in ; there was a regular babel in which he bore his part, hearing always her slow, soft voice amongst the shrill ones and the deeper notes of the men, waiting for her to turn her head his way. When she did it took him unawares. He felt as if they must all see him start.

"You are riding that horse again," he said. He had not meant to take that dangerous tone of guardianship; he had meant to say something ordinary about the weather.

"Yes," said Judy, and patted the chestnut with a soothing, but not too firm little hand. "I'm trying to cure myself of being timid. But I'm like that girl who used to put one foot every day in the same field with a bull—when his back was to her—and said she was cultivating courage. He's my second horse, and I told the man he needn't be too anxious to keep him fresh. I hoped perhaps he would steal a gallop."

She spoke lightheartedly, but the listeners could see that it was an effort. Probably she was making a poor attempt to propitiate her husband.

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"You can be as foolhardy as you like, Mrs. Lauder," said Lord Robert, cutting in. "Accidents haven't such terrors for you as for ancient bachelors like myself. Here's Jordan pretending to insure all comers, and he won't guarantee a poor devil against matrimony, the most serious accident in the world. He says it doesn't come in under the heading of hunting casualties. And I say he doesn't know his business."

He shook his head at Jordan, whose mind was no longer on these matters, and who was edging into the corner with the intention of dashing through to the ford before the crush, expecting the fox to cross the river. There *was* a fox inside, and hounds were driving him that way.

"There isn't a cover like Burbidge's in the world," said Gay. "It's like London, a jumping-off place. You come down with the Belvoir and you never know where you'll end, away in the Cottesmore country, or right in the heart of the Quorn. It's a place to dream of all your life, with its endless possibilities, and its weird green spires, sitting on the edge of the river."

"There he goes!" said the watchful Jordan,

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waving his arm and pointing to the heights. At the same instant another fox flashed out towards the railway. But there was no hesitation which was the one to follow.

Hounds splashed through the river and were flying up the slope southward, as the crowd pushed along the ride and struggled through the ford at the back of the cover, spreading on the hill. The raw air had become electric; the empty fields a scene of frantic endeavour. For the first few minutes all were equal; a tumultuous army; and then the front rank drew away; there were gaps in it here and there, a visible thinning of the pursuit.

The fox had all but reached Burton, then whirled suddenly to the right, and without checking was away over the Sandy Lane, imperceptible now in the distance, but easy to follow with that swelling chorus to guide a man who could keep the pace.

The Babes, riding their hardest, were left behind as if they had been standing still. Rafferty himself, who did not run to the finest cattle, buzzed past them with his mouth open, blowing harder than his horse. But they valiantly pelted on. There were others in the same case as they.

"Hear them!" gasped Pinner. "They're

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keeping on over the rifle range. We'll never get up unless they lose him in the bottom. Oh, come on! Come over——! Stokes, Stokes, since you *are* down you might pull up that stake."

Stokes, who had gone first at an obstacle, and taken it on his head, got up dizzily and did as he was asked; and Pinner blundered over to catch his horse. There was grief on all sides, but the survivors kept on like madmen, following the established custom of seeing out the run before returning to pick up the pieces.

"Where have they got to?" said Stokes, rubbing his eyes and staring. Pinner flung up his arm.

"There they are!" he screamed. "Still running, by jingo! Down in the valley, just half a dozen with them. They've turned again. No, they haven't. He's twisting a bit. I can't see behind that hillock——"

"The sheep are running beyond," said Stokes.

"Sheep?" cried Pinner. "It's not sheep; it's not sheep; it's hounds!"

He looked round him wildly.

"Just see that!" he said. "Call that luck! Here we are, miles behind, and they're

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heading straight for the Tir House. You bet your life that fox has been in our spinney. I'll get off this quadruped and run for it."

Two or three grazing horses, disturbed by the chase, came floundering past, and the sight of them inspired him with a wilder plan. He slid off his exhausted steed and dashed at them as they halted, breathing excitement; grabbed one of them by the forelock, and thrust his bridle over its head, clambering on its back before its astonishment at being caught and bitted could find expression. Fortunately it was not a cart-horse. He dug his knees into its fat sides and started off in grand style, overtaking Stokes as he went down into the valley. The dim figures in the first flight vanished over the horizon, the cry of hounds sounded far and ghostly, muffled by distance. Sometimes it seemed bearing to the right, and again changed and was carried to them southerly.

"They're slackening a bit," said Rafferty, puffing hard. He had come to a standstill in the bottom, and as the Babes hurled themselves after him, and Pinner's glorious experiment came to an ignominious end, he had time to perceive their plight.

"Lost your saddle?" he said, staring.

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"No. It's on my horse. I left him back there," said Pinner vaguely. He was sitting on the ground. "You do these things when you get excited."

The kidnapped horse had given him three minutes of exultation, and then—scattered him. He felt himself and laughed. "Never mind me!" he shouted after Stokes, who was plugging on by himself.

Gay had taken a wrong turn himself, and was making up for lost time. He flew past Lord Robert, toiling hard. "He'll go to ground in Cream Gorse or at the back of my place," he shouted in consolation. "Don't hurry; he knows he's safe in this country from a Belvoir spade."

But the fox had no such pusillanimous bent. He was making a great curve, swinging right round towards Kirby, a sweep that hounds took unfaltering, though his turn was sharp and flung out the nearest riders. They lost ground in the difficult bit of country into which their ardour had hurried them, while the tardy ones gathered on the ridge and cut across the lane in a rejoicing body, coming up in time to fall in close and witness the end of the run, after missing out the middle.

Gay lost that. While hounds were running

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into their fox below the railway, swooping over the line in front of an engine that for an instant seemed dashing into them, but was pulled up within a yard ; while their baying awoke the echoes and proclaimed that the run was over, he was stooping over a figure that lay dreadfully still in the trampled grass ; and his face was white.

She had ridden pluckily in a piteous effort to satisfy the man who had chosen to stigmatise her as spiritless and a coward. She was afraid of the chestnut and the chestnut knew it ; and still she had stuck to him. An unsafe beast, swift as the wind, but as uncertain. He had taken it into his head to refuse this fence, and then, as Judy put him at it again, had rushed at it like a demon. She could not steady him ; he crashed blindly into it, breaking in like timber like matchwood, staggering up a way. And Judy lay quite still.

rest had vanished. Few of them had been as far up, and as the fox turned they had all swept round. The noise of galloping grew fainter and fainter, and died away. And then came the baying of hounds ; the finish. . . .

"She's not dead ; she's not dead," repeated the man, scarcely believing himself, and touched her. He had seen many falls, but

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none that had smitten him with such unreasonable dread. But she was breathing; her heart was beating; she was only stunned.

He looked round.

It was one of his fields they had run over, and yonder stood his house. Without the wit to consider any other course, he lifted her up and carried her over the darkening fields towards it, his hunter following to his stable like a dog. The chestnut was away, flaunting loose after the rest, until somebody should catch him.

Her weight was nothing . . . but the limp little hands, the colourless face, were heavy on his heart.

Once on the way she sighed. And he stumbled and held her closer, the one precious thing in the world.

There was nobody in the house as he walked into it with his burden. His tread clang hollow in the passage, his call brought no answer. And he did not call again, but laid her down on the great sofa in his sitting-room and dropped on his knees beside her, loosening the tie folded round her throat with fingers that were unsteady at their office.

He didn't in the least know what he ought to do for her; she was so slight, so fragile, so

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different to a man. . . . And when her lids lifted slowly his heart jumped and stood still.

"Are you—hurt?" he stammered. She began to shudder.

"Oh, the horse——" she said brokenly. "I *am* a coward; . . . I *am* a coward. . . ."

Gay took her hands in his; the little limp hands that had no strength in them, the slim, slim wrists.

"Hush," he said. "It's all over; you're safe."

Her half-conscious terror forsook her; her sobbing breath quieted.

"Oh, I was so frightened," she said, holding on to his hand.

That any man could look on her without tenderness——! It was unthinkable. He watched her lips parting at last in a wondering, wistful smile.

"I am not broken, am I? What am I doing here?"

"I brought you here in my madness," said Gay stupidly.

"Your house. . . . I am in your house. . . ." she said in a dreaming whisper. It was no more strange to her, but no more real than at that moment it was to him.

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How quickly the dusk was creeping into the room ; how the firelight glistened ; how good it was to dream. . . .

But the man's voice, troubled, came to her, shook her dizzy fancy that she had wandered here in a world of comforting sleep.

"You're fainting," he said. "You're in pain."

His cry was sharp with reality. It called her to herself. With a swift effort she stood up and looked at him ; saw him far off and very close.

"I am all right," she said ; "only sick—and—giddy."

The room danced round her as she spoke, and she thought she laughed, because somebody was laughing, and it was not the man looking at her with a grave face, whose shoulder was her support.

"Stay there a little while. Rest," he said, and her head sank on the sofa cushion ; her eyes shut on their dizziness.

Gay stood looking down on her, still unbalanced by the wild moment of fear for her. It had seemed so natural to carry her in here ; he had forgotten, so possessed was he by the thought of her, that she did not belong to him. And now the unutterable sweetness of her

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presence in his house warned him of its danger.

She was only shaken. He must take her home before he lost hold on himself and broke into foolishness. Who in the vulgar, gossiping outside world would understand his raging hopelessness, his longing to keep her from the man who was by the cruelty of circumstances miscalled her husband? He dared not let himself think of that. . . .

It gripped him, mastered him. He went over to her and laid his hand on her hair.

She gave a little shivering sigh.

"Judy——" he said. He had never called her by her name before. He was half afraid of the sound of it on his lips.

And she looked up at him, her eyes imploring.

"I . . . I want to be good," she said.

No. Nothing ignoble should touch her. . . .

He left her, and went over to the door

"I'll take you home," he said.

CHAPTER X

"**I**S it dangerous?" said Judy.

She stood up in the motor, the bitter wind blowing back her long blue veil, gazing down the hillside.

Behind towered the imitation battlements of Little Belvoir, that mock castle set high in the midst of its hanging wood. All down the Broughton hill cars were whizzing, manœuvring clumsily in at the gate and blundering into position inside the field, where a black swarm of spectators clustered, thronging thickest round the flapping sides of two or three luncheon tents.

It was the kind of weather that belongs to a steeplechase, no sun, no enervating mildness, but a dull sky and a threatening whistle in the wind, penetrating through the heaviest overcoat, stinging the blood and driving its recklessness into man and beast. It was a drying, withering wind, the forerunner of a frost.

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Judy's great black car was drawn up a little way from the others. She caught the changing drift of discussion as men went stamping up and down in her neighbourhood, keeping themselves warm; and watched the horses passing delicately through the groups of admirers; heard a buzz of voices farther off, and nodded when anybody came within greeting distance. She was ashamed of her nervousness, and looked for reassurance to Tokenhouse when he came sauntering over the trampled grass, wrapped in a long coat and wearing his woollen comforter. He seemed the one unexcited person, the one to whom all this was a curious, empty show.

"Dangerous?" he repeated. "Not particularly. You've been watching the farmers' race, with your heart in your mouth at all the empty saddles? But they're used to falling off. They know how. There's one old chap I know used to ride regularly, and when he came to anything he hadn't a liking for you could see him kick his feet out of the stirrups. He used to say he guessed the old horse could tackle it best alone."

He was looking down and away over the improvised course, so terrible to the inexperienced, and his eye kindled.

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Starting three fields on the other side of the turnpike and crossing it low down, it ran past the lodge in the bottom, over the Greenhills lane, rising on the further hill until it swept round the clump of trees on the skyline and turned, coming back over the lane again to finish just underneath the watchers, who from their post on the hillside could track the flags all the way. There had been no tinkering at the fences to speak of; they were rough and ragged; and all of the way was grass.

"Ah," he said thoughtfully, "it's like old times. . . ."

Judy leaned to him anxiously.

"I heard them say," she confided, "that the ditch was a deathtrap."

"Oh," said Tokenhouse, smiling at her hushed voice, "and it scared you? Nonsense. There are only two ugly places and that's one of them, but you mustn't magnify its importance. Why, it makes a man extra careful. You never heard of a bad fall at a really difficult leap, either in a race or hunting. Walk down with me to that ditch and see for yourself what a lot of trouble they take to get over."

But Judy drew back.

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"No," she said. "I would rather not. I can see it all from here."

Tokenhouse looked at her whimsically.

"Won't you come?" he said. "I'll promise you nobody shall be hurt. At least, not desperately. It isn't a donkey race. . . ."

But as she would not he went off by himself, looking back once or twice and waving his stick at her; and his place at her side was taken by the Babes, who came racing up, returning to their allegiance after the distracting thrills of the farmers' race, happy and loquacious.

"Wish we had gone in for it," said Pinner. "Did you see 'em go down like ninepins? Any one of our gees could have worn them down. I did want to have a try, but Stokes was afraid it would get into the papers. We've an awful reputation for industry to keep up, and if they heard of us larking at steeple-chases it would be fatal. The Thing-um-bob says it's going to report our progress from time to time to its readers."

"It's nervous work farming with the Press on your mind," said Stokes. His freckled face took on an owlsh look of solemnity befitting the thought, but under it lurked a grin. They were hanging on to the car, one on each

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side, as if they expected it to plunge forward down the hill.

"They wired last week for our bill of fare," said Pinner, "but we're getting into the game; we were quite composed. It's a solemn thought that everybody all over England knows that we have bacon and eggs for breakfast, and for dinner mostly a frugal chop (that's one of their adjectives, we only supplied the mutton). They printed it next door to the menu of a public banquet and pointed a tremendous moral."

"Some day they'll demand our ledgers," said Stokes. "That's the worst of it. A horrid, bald statement of profit and loss."

"We'd get along all right," said Pinner hopefully, "if we didn't get stuck with such queer creatures. I'd no idea that animals varied so. We've had an hysterical cow on the premises since Tuesday, and Johnson complains he can't get a wink of sleep."

"We were going to ask if she kept you awake," said Stokes.

They both looked solicitously at Judy, remarking her paleness.

She wished she had gone down with Tokenhouse to stand close to that jump that was so dangerous. Surely she was unwarrantably

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nervous. . . . And she had nothing to excuse her but a premonition, a silly terror of some intangible, awful thing.

Nobody else was afraid. Other women passed, chattering; gathered on the hillock below her clapping their hands and applauding the men they knew. They never turned away their eyes when a horse went down. . . .

"It's the red-coat race they are at next," said Stokes. "Your race I mean, you know, the one Major Lauder rides in. It's between him and Gay. None of the others have got a chance. That's what everybody says."

"Here they come," said Pinner.

A ripple passed along the crowd, and through them came six or seven riders in their hunting clothes, bright in the sombre landscape, on their way to the starting-post. Burkinshaw was leading, jolly and self-satisfied, turning a deaf ear to Maria's injunctions, mounted on a respectable hunter, who could be trusted not to put a foot wrong, but would probably take her time; next to him came a pale young man on a chestnut that was palpably despising him; and then Lauder, passing with neither look nor word for his wife, his face heavily determined, his jaw set, riding the raking bay that he had sworn to bring home first. After

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him Gay went down on his brown mare Fanny, who flirted past with a deceiving pretence of slightness, more blood than bone. Then came the ruck, the others that did not count to Judy, who leaned forward, watching the small procession wind its way down the hill, cross into the fields beyond, and grow less and less in the distance. . . .

Tokenhouse had posted himself at the brook. He found Lord Robert and one or two more inspecting it, and a vet standing under the hedge close by shaking his head.

It was a bad place. At one end it was an ordinary ditch, at the other it widened into a pond; and the hedge was on the landing side.

Hurdles had been put up on the take-off side, and the men riding down to the barrier matted with gorse and thorns could not see what they were jumping into, could not judge the immense leap they might have to clear.

"What do you think of this?" said Lord Robert. "Huskinson calls it murder. It's asking a horse to rise to a hurdle and giving him what's impossible to clear—and then receiving him on a row of pointed stakes. Look at that damned hedge! He's had two horses to doctor and one to shoot; and

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I've pulled out a few of these infernal sticks myself. I don't care what official idiots left them in."

"Yes; it's nasty," said Tokenhouse.

"Nasty? Rather!" exclaimed Lord Robert. "The men on the right fly over the narrow bit; the rest take a pond and fall back into the water, or stake their horses if the poor brutes get as far as the bank."

"You take your chance," said Tokenhouse, walking round to occupy a position in the lee of the hedge beside the others.

"Oh, I dare say it's nothing to a man with your dare-devil recollections," said Lord Robert. "That ugly horse of Sophia's wants handling. I am backing Fanny, though the weight's a good deal for her to carry—thirteen stone. I should think you and Gay rode about the same."

"Within a pound or two," said Tokenhouse absently. The wind swirled round and caught them, blowing off Lord Robert's hat. He jammed it down over his nose and stood in closer.

"Brings the tears into your eyes," he grumbled. "How long are they going to keep us shivering on the watch? I've been telling Gay to keep a sharp eye on Lauder.

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Shouldn't be surprised at anything. You'd think his winning this trumpery race was a matter of life and death. I never saw a man so keen. Of course, it's to curry favour with the implacable Sophia."

"He was always a bad loser," said Tokenhouse.

Lord Robert looked at him rather closely.

"Doesn't all this carry you back to old times?" he said. "Don't you want to be up and doing? Ah, wait till you feel the wind of them passing——!"

"They are off," said the vet

The horses came over the first fence all in a line like a flight of birds. At the second jump it was a broken line, and the thudding hoofs sounded louder. Down the middle of the field they came, straight for the formidable ditch. They were all bearing down, hanging on the right, but there was not room, and they spread.

Splash! The man on the left was in and his neighbour, seeing a horrid gulf yawning under him, swung round in the air, leaping sideways, cleared hurdles and water and hedge in a tremendous bound, cannoning against another man landing on his right with an impact that knocked him over.

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"Look out!" yelled Lord Robert as the Slipper, like a great cat, leapt over, just missing the fallen man. "Damn it all, did you see Lauder's face? He knows it's Gay that's down."

Fanny had recovered herself before her rider; she was unhurt. She staggered up, shook herself, and was starting off alone, as Tokenhouse caught her bridle.

"Good old girl," he said. "Good old girl. . . ."

His voice was hoarse and funny. An overmastering impulse had wiped out in that one moment the last two years. With neither whip nor spur he threw himself into the saddle. It had come back; it had all come back. . . .

An extraordinary exultation filled his soul, blotting out its captivity, possessing him with a sense of power restored. The wind was sharp and salt in his mouth; its whistle shrilled past him like the note of his own triumph. He felt as if he had come back to life.

He had left two horses struggling in the un-jumpable end of the ditch. There were four in front, bundling over the low hedge, a little demoralised by what they had left behind. The brown mare went smooth as

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silk, leaning on a hand that had not lost its cunning, feeling the electric pressure of his knees. Not for nothing had Tokenhouse been known as the finest rider of his day.

Las' but gaining at every stride, she flicked in and out of the road and went swooping on over the straight meadows in the bottom. Away up on the hillside rose a murmur, gathering into a marvelling shout as conjecture spread. Tokenhouse smiled to himself at that and at the amazed gasp of the man he was overhauling. Since he had begun he would stick to it; he would win.

The fields slid past; the fences rose up and sank. They were over the Greenhill lane, breasting the tiring rise. Another horse was down, one dropped back; there were only three of them in it as they gained the brow of the hill and swung round wide of the haystack and the bunch of trees. The chestnut was beat; he had gone too wildly, and now his rider called on him in vain. Sophia Bland's great bay was leading, going his hardest. Lauder had sent him along all the way. And the mare was sliding up to him. It was a battl' between the two.

No cries seized hold of Tokenhouse, almost blurring the swift realities of the present.

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The last race he had ridden came back to him with a clearness he had not felt since its catastrophe dropped a curtain between him and what had been himself. Yesterday and to-day clashed together in his mind. He looked once, strangely, at the other man, as side by side they galloped on. There was in Lauder's face a fury, the amazement of a man who saw himself thwarted by the works of the devil.

And so they came to the third fence from the finish, a bad one with a drop into boggy ground. The bay was still going tremendously, but he could not keep it up much longer, and he had nothing in hand to get home with. If Fanny got over this jump first the race was hers. And she would. . . .

What was the matter with Lauder? He was hanging back in the last few strides. What move was in his head?

A curious knowledge of what was coming gripped Tokenhouse. He knew. . . .

Up went the mare, and the bay shot in on her inside, rising with her; but before he could strike her Tokenhouse pulled her aside, just missing Lauder's knee. The desperate trick had failed.

"By God!" he cried out, in his voice

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of two years ago. "You don't do that twice!"

And then the bay landed heavily, slithering in the bog, and the mare was gallantly making her rush home. Tokenhouse was flying on over the last two fences with the race in his hands.

He rode in to frantic shouting, a strange spectacle, his long coat flapping, his trousers rucked to his knees. All the world was running to meet him, welcoming, betwixt laughter and emotion, his astonishing resurrection.

"And you wouldn't do it for me," said Sophia Bland.

Tokenhouse dropped to the ground and leaned against the mare's heaving side, hearing like a man in his sleep the chorus of acclamation. A sweat broke out on his forehead, his limbs trembled under him; he was shaken by a mental sickness of reaction.

"I don't know who I did it for," he said. "Upon my soul, Sophia, I don't know how I could."

With a dazed expression he submitted to the popular ovation, shut in on all sides by a hilarious crowd of familiar faces, by men wringing his hand and hiding the warmth of their feelings under universal chaff at his unorthodox get-up.

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"Look at him," said Lord Robert, who had whisked up on the vet's pony to see the finish, and whose eyes were still starting out of his head. "Never even took off his old comforter. Just hopped up and sailed away. It was more than sporting; it was positively unearthly."

"He'll want it," said another man. "He'll want every ounce of weight if he is to turn the scale. And he didn't even stop for Gay's whip——"

"No, he didn't stop for any mortal thing," said Lord Robert, striking his hands together. "Poor old Burkinshaw gave up when he beheld him. He declares the sight of him forging up like a violent ghost shook him out of his saddle. Says he just tumbled off and lay staring after him open-mouthed."

"We didn't believe our eyes up here," said another; "but when we knew him—you never heard such an uproar!"

"The doctor says Gay has broken a rib or two and hurt his shoulder," said Lord Robert; "but I believe he's just weak with laughing."

There were no plaudits to spare for the second horse, no sympathy with his unpopular rider. Sophia Bland, making one of the procession escorting Tokenhouse to the weigh-

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ing tent, seemed to have forgotten her own ill-fortune. But as Lauder pushed his way up to her side her eyes flickered strangely, her mouth grew hard.

"You break all your promises, Bill," she said.

That was her attitude. It struck him that she was exulting in his defeat, although it was her horse that had lost—purely because it gave her an opportunity to taunt him. His bid for forgiveness had failed ignominiously; he had not succeeded in carrying out his boast. And Sophia was not inclined to spare him. She had played with him, let him live awhile in false hopes of a truce between them. Had she wanted to humiliate him again? There was no plumbing the bitterness of a woman. . . .

"I'll buy that horse of you," he said thickly. "I'll buy him at any price."

"With your wife's money?" she asked. "What do you want him for?"

Her scornful glance crossed his look, black as thunder.

"To shoot him," said Lauder between his teeth.

He pushed on, savage with the world, thirsting for a quarrel, and burst in that blind rage into the circle pressing on the winner.

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"Did you accuse me of riding you down?" he said.

The men standing round Tokenhouse stared at him; their looks were all unfriendly. Here was a man who could not take defeat like a gentleman, who had not the decency to mask his fury of disappointment.

"No," said Tokenhouse. "I told you you should not do it twice."

"What do you mean by that?" said Lauder. The hostility round him made no difference to him. His manner was truculent; he was not at all master of himself.

"Only," said Tokenhouse, "that the ride has refreshed my memory, which has been poor. I know now to whose tactics I owe a misfortune that put me out of the running two years ago."

His words fell on a silence, upset as he concluded by the bystanders' hasty interposition between him and the other man. His face was impassive, his tone unexcited as he spoke to the adversary choking with incoherent rage.

"We'll have no rows here," said Lord Robert. "That'll do, Lauder. Go and consult your solicitor if you want to fight. . . . The man is beside himself. . . . I say, Tokenhouse, was that gospel?"

"My opinion," said Tokenhouse quietly.

THE STRAW

"Well, he brought it on himself," said Lord Robert. "Where's he gone? Strikes me you'll want a bodyguard."

But it was unaccompanied that the hero of the last race found his way at length through the confusion of people getting ready for departure, to the solitary figure in the great black motor. The Babes had left her, having hurried off at the first intimation to the scene of Gay's disaster, promising to come back with news, but entirely forgetting in their pre-occupation. Lauder had not been near her. And her face was turned away from the multitude. She was gazing down the hillside with a strained intentness that missed all that went on around her. Almost it seemed as if she must have been unconscious of his return in triumph. The blue veil fluttered round her head, and mechanically she lifted her hand from time to time, brushing it away. As Tokenhouse addressed her she turned to him with a start, and he saw that her eyes were brimming and wild with tears.

"What is the matter, my child?" he said.

She stretched out her hands to him; he felt them quiver, saw her lip quivering in a sob.

"Is he badly hurt?" she said.

THE STRAW

"Who, Gay?" said Tokenhouse. "No, not badly."

With an odd shock he realised that agonised watch that had made her careless of his exploit. To her he was still the confidential nonentity, the whimsical friend and adviser who had nothing to do in life. Well, it was better so.

"I was afraid," she said piteously. "I thought he must be dying."

"Hush," he said. "Don't cry. Don't betray yourself. They are bringing him now; you'll see him. . . ."

Judy clung to his hand, finding strength in its painful grasp.

"Where were you all this time?" she said.

"I thought you would never come back."

He could not smile at her ignorance of what he had got through in the twenty minutes since he waved his hand to her on the hill.

All that had been a blank to her; she had been deaf to the crowd's enthusiasm, her eyes unseeing, her spirit with the man who had fallen. His own thoughts were curious.

"That's right," he said, comforting her.

"Be a brave girl and don't give way. You mustn't imagine things are as bad as that. Why, a fall is nothing!"

"Are you sure?" she said, still troubled,

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but trusting, all her secret printed in that gaze of tragic frankness.

"Sure," said Tokenhouse.

People were drifting that way, packing themselves into the cars, getting on to their horses. Lord Robert strolled up, hunting for his party.

"Can't find my burdens," he said. "I'm giving a lift to half the population and I can't collect them. The stout ones have to be started on; they've to walk up the Broughton hill, or the car will slide down backwards and land us at the bottom. Look at these unfortunates grinding and churning the gateway into a quagmire. We shall be blocked in this field till the Day of Judgment. Are you coming on with me, Tokenhouse, or will you go home with Gay? There he is, pale and interesting, in the Brocktons' car. We'll give him a cheer, Mrs. Lauder, though he only won by favour of his lodger."

Somebody had lent his motor to bring Gay, and it came up slowly, with the Babes hanging on to it, half in, half out, and halted below the gate, waiting to pass.

"He doesn't look much the worse," said Lord Robert. "Broken three ribs, they tell

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me, and bruised his shoulder. You'll be able to nurse him, Tokenhouse; no dangerous importations. If you'll believe me, Mrs. Lauder, the risk of complications that a man runs is awful. I'm susceptible myself; I know how it is when you're laid on the flat of your back. I make a point of calling out before I lose consciousness, 'Mind you pick out a plain one.' Not the doctor, of course, the nurse; though it's not an infallible precaution. Here's your Anarchist wandering back to his engine. Let's walk on to the gate while he turns this thing and explodes it over these lumpy furrows."

Judy looked wistfully at Tokenhouse.

"Yes, come on as far as the gate," he said, and she descended. Lord Robert fell into step on her other side, but she was not listening to his prattle.

"I know a sad case," he said. "A diplomatist too, not one of us simple sportsmen. He was dangerously ill, and his sister, who presided over him generally and knew his weaknesses, went down on her knees to the specialist who was operating and said her brother must have male nurses. But the great man wouldn't hear of it. He said the case was too delicate, that the patient would die

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if he was left to the rough tending of a man. However, he said there was positively no cause for anxiety, for he had a nurse on his staff who was over forty and the plainest woman he had ever seen. 'Show her to me,' said the suspicious sister; and when he had done so she fell on his neck and said, '*She* will do.' In six months that poor diplomatist had married her and ruined his career. Ah, it's not surprising we helpless men have a terror of influenza."

He talked on with the dry irrelevance it pleased him to affect, as the three of them walked over to the gate. Perhaps if he had been interrogated he would have put down his motive in sticking to them as curiosity—not by any means admitting a desire to stand by Tokenhouse who, still posing as a disembodied phantom, saw no reason to drop his post as an ally of Mrs. Lauder on the top of that encounter with the man himself. These philosophers were imprudent. And if Lauder in his mad humour should rush upon him, the situation was not one to be missed. He chuckled, keeping a shrewd look out, but not allowing his boasted curiosity to scan too nearly the little pale face under the motoring bonnet, to ask what was hurrying her faltering

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but almost running step. No one who knew Lord Robert would have believed it of him, but he had it in him to be discreet.

As Judy, between her two supporters, reached the gateway, it was impassable. A heavy car had stuck midway, and its human freight had tumbled out and were tugging and pushing, enlisting help, ignoring the public laughter and the impatience of those behind.

"She'll never loose 'ee, t'Broughton clay," shouted a farmer, riding five abreast in his market cart, bulging out on the splashboard; and a gust of merriment ran along the string of waiting vehicles. Tokenhouse looked over the hedge.

"We are prisoners," he called out to Gay. "How are you?"

And Judy saw him, but was not seen.

He was propped up in the car, outwardly undamaged save for a scratched face; and he was answering all inquiries with a grin that turned sympathy into appreciation of his pluck. As Tokenhouse looked over into the road he moved suddenly, winced, and tried to laugh as a man should at that reminder.

"Come over and tell me all about the race," he said. "I am pinned here, you see. Oh, I heard the shouting; it would have reached

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me if I had been deaf and dead—and I've heard a dozen versions. I want yours, you old impostor. Don't look so serious; I haven't been kicked to pieces. And if I had——" he broke off with the laugh that hurt, but was the only way he could show emotion—"it's worth it."

The Babes, dangling at the side of the car, had dropped to the ground, looking, awe-struck, at Tokenhouse. Judy, shielded from sight by his tall, spare figure, comforted by one glimpse, felt the tears she had checked blinding her again. Why did he say it was worth it? Worth it. . . . He did not know what those awful minutes had been like, how madly her heart was beating at his voice. And because she could not bear to let him discover, she turned and stumbled away alone across the trampled grass.

The men did not follow her. Either they guessed, or were ignorantly merciful, and forbore. But somebody intercepted her, some acquaintance asking if she were seeking for her husband—and then Burkinshaw crossed her path, hailing her in his good-natured bass.

"My wife's looking for you, Judy." Maria's searching was always done by proxy. "She says you are to come back with us and stay

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the night. Don't wait for Lauder; nobody knows where he's gone."

"Thanks awfully. I—I can't," said Judy. She was afraid of herself, and wanted to be alone with the strange woman she had become. She could not face spying kindness.

A little further another person accosted her, diffident before her bewildered look that scarcely seemed to see him.

"Mrs. Burkinshaw is waiting for you. She asked me to find you and bring you to her."

"I am going home," said Judy, so wildly that he fell back.

Her own car suddenly upreared itself, lumbering over the rise towards her, and she stopped in her wandering haste. A man talking to the chauffeur came up, repeating the absurd formula that seemed to haunt her steps. She brushed him aside.

Maria had been unlucky in her emissaries, who all returned to her unsuccessful. Her orders had been laconic. "Fetch her to me," issued with no misgiving that Judy's gentleness would dare to disregard her mandate. Each man as he came back, apologetic, increased her wrath.

"Dear me," she said. "You are helpless,

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all of you. Any one would think I'd sent you to capture a little dragon. How am I to leave the girl? Dicky says Lauder is half demented. She can't go back with him. . . . She is my cousin. . . . Rather late in the day to awake to my duties? Not at all, Augusta. She was quite safe in the crowd of us; he wasn't at all likely to go near her. Besides, I forgot her till Tokenhouse reminded me. I said I'd take her away with us. Really, I am anxious about her. Where is that man?"

"Lauder has left," said one of her ambassadors. "Some one saw him riding through the gate."

Maria's conscience, weighted as it was by a heavy fur coat and her own portliness, became less active. And they were blocking the way.

"If you can't persuade her," she said, resigned, "I suppose we had better start."

It only pricked her slightly as their heavier progress up the interminable hill was rivalled and passed by the large black uncovered car carrying one solitary passenger; and her gesticulation was lost on the dimming mysteries of a blue gauze veil. Maria did not have presentiments. She had done her part and was satisfied.

CHAPTER XI

TOKENHOUSE banked up his fire.

He was stiff and tired but disinclined for sleep. It was freezing without; there was no wind in the chimney, no rattling of shutters, and the house was quiet. The Crows had had their nightly procession of locking up, a rite that Mrs. Crow never attempted to perform alone, lacking heart. When Crow was absent she left it to the casual prudence of the master or his lodger, excusing herself with the illogical plea that her fear of thieves was too lively. Clattering the bars into place in the eerie silence was like an invocation; they might spring in upon her. . . . All she did was to set a bucket of water outside her bedroom door. Whether in case of fire or in the hope of tripping the enemy she never explained. Crow himself, the prodigal, padding upstairs one night in his stocking soles, was the only mortal who had ever stumbled over it, a half-drowned witness

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to its efficacy. He assuredly turned and fled.

There was no shrill singing in the kitchen regions. Mrs. Crow was only a nightingale when deserted. Moreover, she and her husband had retired.

A summer night has no stillness; it is too full of living things, leaves and grasses breathing—and birds that are never all asleep. But now and again in the winter fall nights utterly silent, as if the earth had been frightened and lost its pulse. The world as it were is lifeless in the clasp of its own ghost. It was so to-night.

Tokenhouse sat on, smoking his eternal cigarette, smiling a little sardonically, a little absently, taking a reminiscent look at himself.

To-day's unexpectedness had thrown open a closed book. He took down that history from its dusty shelf, turning over its odd chapters. Why, he had half forgotten what kind of a man he was—once.

Dispassionately he allowed himself an amused retrospection. Memories crowded on him, almost too many of them, jostling each other. Once or twice he laughed aloud.

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It was mightily entertaining to look back upon, but history was the word, not politics ; it was done. That momentary spark had only served to recall old, old extinguished fires. Still, it was pleasant to feel that unaccustomed ache in his muscles ; to know that he could, at a pinch, astonish people yet.

Into the deadly quietness of the night broke a noise of horse's hoofs. Some belated wayfarer, and apparently one ill fitted to journey in the dark—defying obscurity in a reckless gallop along the stony road. At the corner there was a kicking and plunging as if the horse had been ridden into the hedge, and above the stamping hoofs a man's voice rang out swearing horribly at his blunder, making the darkness hideous.

Tokenhouse heard it distinctly in the house. He thought of throwing up the library window and shouting to the man, probably an intoxicated groom ; but before he had decided whether it was worth the trouble the disturbance had ceased and the irregular gallop was growing distant.

Gay was moving in his room overhead. The old oaken floor quivered under him—he was getting out of bed.

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"What's up?" called Tokenhouse. His shout, muffled by the ceiling, obtained no answer. It sounded as if he were dressing, or at least making an attempt to get at his clothes. The doctor who had ordered him to stay in bed would certainly not authorise his getting up like that. Tokenhouse went upstairs to investigate, and put his head in at the door.

"If there's anything you want, why couldn't you thump on the floor?" he said. "Good Lord, man, what are you trying to do?"

He was half dressed already, although his face was white with the pain of movement, strapped and bandaged as he was; and he looked with a set, strange face at Tokenhouse.

"Oh, you couldn't hear," he said. "You don't know who it was passed down by the corner; you didn't catch his blasphemous drunken voice——"

The candle flickered in the draught from the open window. Tokenhouse came into the room and shut it down.

"It was Lauder, was it?" he said.

"Who else?" said Gay. "Going home. Going home to her. Do you understand?"

"Gently," said Tokenhouse. "That doctor's a fool. He should have known you'd

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go on like this. . . . Get back to your bed, Gay. I'll fetch a book and sit up with you for a bit."

Gay leant against the bedpost, drawing his breath hard between his teeth.

"It hurts confoundedly," he muttered.

He looked rational enough, but as Tokenhouse laid a hand on him he broke out passionately, throwing off his arm.

"I've got to protect her," he said; "I'm going. She's alone, I tell you. . . . The brute's not safe— —! I'll get to her somehow—if it wasn't so—difficult."

"You couldn't help her," said Tokenhouse, reasoning with him; "it's nearly midnight. They wouldn't let you into the house. You'd faint before you reached it."

Gay broke into gasping, hurting laughter.

"Oh," he said, "it's not the first time I've broken into that house!"

And then, as if that memory itself called him back to immediate action, he pulled himself together, the dominating impulse keeping hold on his wandering senses.

"Poor little girl; poor little girl," he said.

"Don't stare at me, Tokenhouse; I'm not delirious. I don't think I am. *You* didn't hear him cursing. And I've held off; I've

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never half understood——! I'll go mad unless I can get to her in time."

"Quietly," said Tokenhouse, "quietly. If you go there you'll find the house asleep."

"Do you think he'll let her sleep?" said Gay fiercely. "Don't you see she is at his mercy?"

There was no arguing with him. Worn out in body, with a mind wearied by a long effort of endurance, he had been startled out of his uncomfortable dozing, and his unbalanced faculties had seized upon the noise outside; he had worked himself into a fever.

Tokenhouse interrupted him, his purposely measured tones contrasting with the other's wild utterances.

"Look here," he said, "you aren't fit for anything. You know you are not, Gay. Go back to bed and—and I'll take a turn outside. I'll go across the fields and listen, if you like—and let you know if there is anything wrong. That's a little less mad than for you to go staggering over there. You couldn't do any good in that condition."

Gay was listening to him, his eyes half closed, coughing, dizzy with the pain to which he would not submit, but which was conquering him. He nodded.

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"Will you go over at once?" he insisted. "You'll not sit down in the house, pretending you've gone . . . saying to yourself . . . the poor fellow is out of his head; I'll humour him."

There was an odd mixture of sense and unreason in his broken words.

"You can hear me go out," said Tokenhouse.

"Yes," said Gay, catching at that suggestion, "so I can. Hurry, Tokenhouse. I don't mind your going. That—pain makes me too slow. And the worst of it is I love her. It's queer that anybody can help a woman except the man who loves her. He can't, you know. It's true. You told me so yourself. . . . Why don't you go?"

"I'll see you in bed first," said Tokenhouse, advancing.

Gay raised his head. His voice had dropped into an incoherent mutter, but suddenly it found strength. He was still leaning against the wooden bedpost, clad in shirt and trousers, one arm in the sleeve of his coat, the other out of its sling.

"Not till you come back," he said. "Don't stand there like a grain image. I swear if you don't go, I shall."

And the other man went downstairs.

He thought of wakening Crow to mount

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guard while he was gone, but refrained; the less known of this the better. It would not do to risk having a highly-coloured version spread all over the countryside; in wakening Crow his wife had to be reckoned with. And Gay was not so lightheaded as to make the leaving him dangerous; he was simply possessed by a mastering idea. When Tokenhouse should return and report to him that nothing was amiss, he would, no doubt, yield peaceably to his own exhaustion.

The chain rattled as he slipped it off the door, and the key turned. It was very dark for so still a night. Tokenhouse stepped over the threshold.

He had not gone out the back way, because to do so would have been to awaken the dogs kennelled in the yard, but he passed round to the side of the house through the outer paddock. There was a certain fascination in the uninhabited darkness. It made the familiar fields unexplored mysteries, turning the distant wood into a long island of deeper blackness in the uncharted wastes, and giving to a solitary twinkle on the hilltop the significance of a lighthouse.

His sole objective being to pacify Gay, it was surely unnecessary to do more than stroll

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a few hundred yards, perhaps as far as the ridge yonder. Standing there one could dimly track the road, winding like a grey string in its circuitous way to the dark patch that indicated Lauder's house in the hollow, so near by the field-path running through the blurred pastures at his feet.

He was not the only night wanderer abroad. With a grim sense of amusement he perceived a furtive figure skulking behind the hedge, and could not resist the pleasure of scaring him, but let him go. He had always had an indulgent sympathy for rascals.

It was time to turn back. Only a man who had been knocked silly, disordered by wild dreams, unmanned by dangerous emotion, could make seriously a proposition so absurd as that he should go on to that house and assure himself that all was well. He had gone far enough.

And yet. . . . Tokenhouse kept on, the red ash of his cigarette betraying his whereabouts as he fumbled with the latch of a gate. After all, why not ?

The darkness that hid the path and wrapped the gates in obscurity till he nearly touched them brought the house near. It seemed scarcely a minute before he was treading

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softly on the gravel, pausing beside the long windows, shuttered but negligently, for a perpendicular streak of light ran down the middle of one of them. The bar had swung wide of its place, and the shutters had fallen an inch or two apart. . . .

Tokenhouse did not stand there long. He turned away swiftly, taking less care in his retreat; and struck back with a haste that was entirely different to the manner of his approach. He was no longer a man yielding to a fantastic inclination.

Away in the Pastures a fox barked thrice, and again thrice, but no other answered him. Perhaps it was his call that awakened the dogs at Gay's stables. They lifted up their voices, checked, dying down at once. And again all was quiet. Tokenhouse, bearing to the right as he reached the back of the house, saw that the door on that side had been unfastened. It was the quicker way; he went in softly, guessing what that meant. Gay had not trusted him; he had managed to follow. His room was empty.

Quietly Tokenhouse came down and looked about in the library for a moment. Then he started out again. It was strange that he should have missed Gay, but then he had not

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kept to the path ; he did not know it so well.
And where the land dipped the way was as
dark as pitch. . . .

Behind that ill-shuttered window Judy was.
She had been comforting herself with
music. Of late, she had not had the heart ;
it stirred her too much, translated restlessness
and unhappiness, all she struggled to van-
quish, into a language that cried out the
truth to her. She played on her heartstrings
and they vibrated too intensely to the wailing
magic. It was like listening to the cry of her
spirit, and made it harder to be brave.

But to-night the sobbing notes of her
violin could not teach her more sadness than
she knew, make her heart beat more wildly,
asking for the unattainable. As a child loses
its pain in crying she tried to lose herself.

And she looked up, her fingers faltering on
a last low note, to find Lauder standing in the
doorway.

He had ridden straight to the stables and
come through the back into the house. The
servants, shut into their own quarters, were
discussing where he had been. His step was
not steady as he passed down the long passages
into the other end of the house.

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"Fiddling, are you?" he said.

His eyes were bloodshot, his speech thick. He turned abruptly and left her, and as he disappeared, leaving the way clear, she put down her violin and fled instinctively, passing like a driven leaf up the stairs. It was not bodily fear, but rather a kind of horror of him that made her rush into her own room and fling herself against the door, locking it, leaning on it, breathless with her flight.

And then she heard him calling to her to come down.

Ashamed of her terrified impulse, she unlocked the door and came resolutely to the head of the stairs. He was waiting at the bottom.

"You ran away," he said. "Come down here."

She hesitated. There was sinister triumph in his voice. He had come out of the dining-room. He had been drinking brandy. . . . And she was alone with him at this end of the house. Pride forbade her to call the servants.

Her hand closed on the cold, slippery balustrade. And then, as she gazed at Lauder watching her from below, her mind went back to another night when the hall had been dark—this hall, in this house—and she had

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clung so, listening, till a man's face shone in the glimmering light of a match. . . . Unconsciously the clinging hand let go and went up to the pearls at her throat.

"If I catch you bullying your wife again, I'll kill you."

The man who had said that could not come to her help. She might call him, he would not hear. But the thought of him steadied her. Why was she trembling? Oh, surely, surely she was a fool, since she had forgotten how safe she was. The one thing that made life supportable was that look of sullen hatred disfiguring the face of the man below. She had been shrinking from that; shivering at that?—a hatred that saved her from him, although he was her husband. . . .

And she came down to him.

"Ah," he said. "*You're* afraid of me, at least. There's one person left who daren't sneer at me. . . . Why did you stop your fiddling? Why did you run upstairs, you spiritless little coward?"

He caught her rudely by the wrist, and she looked up without speaking into his heavy, marred, handsome face. What did he want with her? Ah, thank God, thank God that he did not love her. . . .

THE STRAW

"What are you smiling at?" said Lauder.

Anger took him with the notion that her terror of him was not as absolute as he had fancied. She was such a wisp of a thing in his grasp. The sight of her always roused in him cruel instincts. He owed her too much, gain and loss; and his grudge against her had turned into a kind of a passion. That she should learn at last to brave him was inconceivable, but the mere suspicion maddened him. He dragged her across the hall by the arm, and pushed her into the room where he had found her.

"Pick up your fiddle," he said.

Mechanically she did his bidding as he released her, and when she turned she saw that he had shut the door. His unsteady eyes were fixed on her with a dreadful meaning.

"Sophia wouldn't sell me that horse," he said. "I would have shot him. She said it wasn't the brute's fault. After all, she was right. You were the little pale temptress that came between us. Suppose I shoot you instead?"

His glare at her was so ruthless that Judy could not be sure that it was a drunken threat. She stood motionless—wondering.

"It's all your doing," he said; "if you

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hadn't come and glittered in my eyes, I'd never have failed Sophia. She warned me I couldn't do without her. And she'll never forgive me, do you hear? You and your accursed money took the manhood out of me. It chokes me. No use my truckling to her, following her like a beaten hound. . . . She'll never forgive me till I am in hell."

His arm straightened suddenly, menacing her, and Judy, seeing a gleaming barrel, gave a cry. Then—then—the man was in earnest?

"You needn't scream," said Lauder. "You don't imagine anybody could burst in here in time? I could shoot you a hundred times while the servants were huddling outside the door."

He paused as if thinking out an idea.

"Go on with your fiddling," he said. "Play a tune. Play the thing you were at when I came out and scared you. I'll let you finish it, and then—I'll make an end of this. D'you understand?"

She began to think he was amusing himself with her. It was the uncertainty that was awful. Like one in a dream she lifted her bow and settled the violin under her chin. Her fingers found the strings.

Lauder had sunk heavily into a chair be-

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tween her and the door. He leaned his head on his hand, watching her with the intentness of a man at a play. She could not tell how far he was still himself, how far stimulated by the brandy of which his breath was reeking. His face was darkly red, his eyes were glazing, but always fixed on her; and there was a grinning relentlessness in his mouth.

She played, measuring no chances, mesmerised, reckless. If this were a trick to drive her into abject terror and gratify his lust for tyranny, or if it were his dreadful earnest, she could not guess. Perhaps the fear he thirsted to inspire had passed in its very extremity into fascination; or perhaps the bodily harm he threatened—death itself—had come to appear as nothing beside that one burning thought that lifted her up and made all misery evil shadows—the thought that this man, who could crush her in his arms and kill her, against whom she had no strength, was her enemy . . . nothing worse.

And all this while the strings vibrated; the bow quivered across them; her fingers travelled nimbly; and her one listener was waiting for the music to end. She would know then. . . .

How was it she could never reach the last

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wild note ? She seemed always near it, and yet it never came. Was she doomed to wander for ever in a maze of plaintive melody, unable to find the true, the fatal chord ?

Her arm ached. She became dimly conscious that this was strange music she was making, less and less recalling the tune she had begun. As if in a trance she had all unknowing left it behind ; she was improvising. . . .

How long had she been playing ? How long had Lauder been sitting there with his implacable drunken eyes, watching for her to break down, to cry, to implore him for pity ? Was it she that laughed ?

He lurched to his feet, but his hands were empty. Had she imagined all that horror, and where was the shining thing that had glistened in his hand ? How ugly his face was now ; how distorted. . . .

“ So you’re not afraid, are you ? ” he said.
“ You laugh at me, too ? I’ll teach you——”

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CHAPTER XII

"**W**AS I a bit queer last night?" said Gay. Tokenhouse came into the room with his usual lounging step, and looked at him over the end of the bed.

"Well," he said, "as a matter of fact, you were."

"What did I do?" said Gay.

Tokenhouse did not answer directly.

"What do you think yourself?" he said. His tone was mildly curious, as if it would be amusing, but not vital, to hear Gay's own idea on a matter of no importance.

"It sounds awfully mad," said Gay. "But do you know I've a sort of notion I woke up and heard Lauder galloping home, cursing, and got it into my head that he was dangerous—and—started out to protect—her. It's all confused. I remember trying to get over a stile and tumbling back into the ditch—and groaning. It was like a bad dream. I didn't get far. You don't, in a nightmare."

THE STRAW

"No," said Tokenhouse; "you didn't get far."

"How did I get back?" said Gay.

"You've no recollection of that?" said Tokenhouse.

"None whatever."

"That is odd. I found you at that stile you mention, and helped you on to your legs and brought you home."

"By yourself?" said Gay.

"Why not?" said Tokenhouse. "You don't suppose I had to carry you? In that case I should have rapped up Crow and put up with his wife's hysterics. They slept through it all. I am going to ask you to hold your tongue about the whole thing. To oblige me; for my personal convenience."

"Why?" said Gay.

"It might be awkward for me if it was known that I had been prowling outside at all hours," said Tokenhouse carelessly. "I don't want to shock you, but our neighbour, Lauder, has been found shot."

"Good heavens!" said Gay.

He started up in bed with a suddenness that made him flinch.

"And she——?" he said, deadly pale.

"Mrs. Lauder was found lying insensible

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in her room," said Tokenhouse quietly. "No, he did not hurt her. The queer thing is they don't seem to know whether he shot himself or not. There was a window broken or open, or something of the kind. It was a black frost and they can't track any footmarks. So you see why I want you to be discreet."

Gay was trying to grasp the tremendous tale. He looked at the teller blankly.

"But," he stammered, "it was as bad for me as for you. We were both out——"

"My dear fellow," said Tokenhouse, smiling. "You were not in a condition to shoot a cat. All the world knows you had an accident yesterday, and there's the doctor to swear all your ribs and contusions and the Law knows what. He left you in bed with a sleeping-draught, didn't he, after he had pulled you about? Said you were not to get up for a week. You can't lift your right arm without pain. Oh, you are safe from uncharitable hypotheses, even if it were known that you had managed to stagger out of the house. When the doctor comes round this morning, he'll probably say you are worse. Tell him you tried to get up; no more than that. He'll never imagine you capable of that escapade, let alone committing murder."

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Gay looked at him doubtfully.

"Moreover," said Tokenhouse, "Lauder and I were uncivil to each other over that race of ours. I think my remarks would bear the interpretation that I had a crow to pluck with him. I don't want to put any preposterous notion into your head; I am simply explaining to you why it is more important for me than for you to keep quiet about last night. When I've got your word on the subject, I'll let Crow bring up your breakfast and allow the Babes to come up—if you feel you can stand them. I believe they've 'een here since cock-crow."

"Oh, all right," said Gay. "But, Tokenhouse—how is she?"

All other matters faded before his thought of Judy.

"I believe Maria has gone to her," said Tokenhouse. He took a turn up and down the room.

"It looks tidy," he said, reflecting. "Nobody would guess who had been your valet. You look as if you had had a bad night; pale and feeble and all that; but, by Jove, you did sleep towards morning. The Crows are bitterly disappointed I wouldn't allow them to rush in and waken you with the horrid

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news. Hark to the jabbering crew in the kitchen."

He went to the top of the stair, and immediately there was a cessation of noise as Crow stopped discussion to bring up his master's breakfast. The Babes, taking that signal for permission, mounted on his heels and established themselves more or less comfortably around the patient. He looked bad, more haggard than he had yesterday, and they opened their mouths to cheer him with a circumstantial account of all they had heard and collected since the first alarm. The sight of him extinguished a wild and fearful romance they had been nursing, and gave their eager voices an apologetic note.

"He must have shot himself, you know," said Pinner with conviction.

"There was a revolver on the floor beside him," said Stokes.

"His valet found him; and he says—but it's all nonsense about that window; it wasn't even broken," said Pinner hastily. "It's only that the shutter wasn't fastened, and the window is one of these long walk-in ones with a knob like a door-handle that can turn on either side; and the catch is loose, a shake and a push lets you in. But how was anybody

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to know that the bar wasn't across the shutter ? And who'd go and leave his weapon beside his victim, and then remember to pull the shutter and close the window after him ? ”

“ It sounds inconsistent,” said Tokenhouse gravely ; “ unless he wanted to leave some evidence behind him.”

Pinner glanced at him uncomfortably, suspecting sarcasm.

“ Well,” he said, “ I suppose it'll all come out at the inquest. I'll tell you one person who's sure it's murder, and that is our man Johnson. He's worked himself into a panic. Says he can't stay in the place ; it might be his turn next.”

“ There's no pleasing him,” said Stokes, but with resignation. “ He was always complaining that it was dull, and saying the country got on his nerves, and promising to desert us ; he said all that kept him alive was reading the murders in the paper. And as soon as we provide a sensation, off he is ! ”

The recollection of Johnson's woe broke up their aspect of proper solemnness.

“ I can't help it,” said Pinner. “ You wouldn't, Gay, not if it was your grandmother who'd been killed, if you'd seen the respectable Johnson with his hair standing up on end

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—and it so sleek—exclaiming he daren't stop. Poor wretch. He used to go down at night to the public-house in the village and sit there till closing time, and then hang about outside till the policeman passed on his round—and then they'd walk on together. He'd no more have ventured to make his way back himself than fly; he was too afraid of hobgoblins. And the policeman used to wait a bit at the turn when they parted, just to give him a feeling of protection while he ran up the fields in the dark. At least, he pretended to."

"If we weren't asleep when he got in," said Stokes, "we used to hear him puffing and blowing after his run. Not much chance for goblins to lay hold of him. But he says he couldn't bear to remain in this unholy locality. Says he feels he's had a wonderful escape, but he'd be frightened to death of Lauder's ghost, if he stayed on what he calls the Spot."

"I told him," said Pinner, "that if he bolted it would look as if he'd done it, and you should have seen him jump. He's consulted with his friend the policeman, who roared at the idea more than we did, and said he'd bear witness he saw him home."

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"We shan't know what to do with ourselves without him," said Stokes. "It'll be a perpetual holiday. No more collars."

He dismissed the subject cheerfully, their release from the civilising influence being a consoling prospect, and turned his attention to Gay.

"We're worrying you, aren't we?" he said. "We'll clear out. You wouldn't like us to look after the farm, or anything, would you? That foreman of yours always sniffs at us, but we'd try to stand up to him."

"No, thanks," said Gay. "I'll manage. I'll be out soon myself."

The Babes, struck by his battered look, decided that he was bad. Of course, he was shocked by last night's catastrophe. So were they, but their horror was merging in excitement. They took themselves off at last.

"Ask Crow to come and help me to dress," said Gay. "I don't care what the doctor says. I must get downstairs."

He was impatient of his own weakness, of the painful coughing that an effort cost. He had done himself no good by his crazy attempt last night. This morning his head ached, but it was clear.

Lauder had shot himself. The words

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called up a dreadful vision of what might have happened worse, of the danger that must have been run by Judy. If the man had been as mad as that, what could he not have done ?

"You are not lying to me, Tokenhouse ?" he said, in a suddenly shaken voice. "You are sure she's not hurt ? But you have not seen her. Tell me the truth."

Tokenhouse looked at him gravely.

"I know she is not hurt," he said. "You can take my word."

Judy lay with her hand clasped in Maria's and her face crushed into the pillow. At times a shudder ran through her body, and then Maria squeezed her hand tighter and murmured something vague and kind. She felt as if she had lain thus for ever, but she wanted never to lift her head.

There was a clock ticking on the wall, and far, far down below in the house there were voices, hushed voices, all muffled in their talking, whispering tragedy. She wondered if they were real voices, because nothing could shut them out from her ears. She liked to hear the clock ; time was passing, with each minute carrying her a little further from last night.

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Only, all the minutes were the same. . . . How many must pass before she could feel that they were different ; that *that* was at last a little distant ? She listened, counting . . . and gave it up with a new shudder. Minute by minute the clock might tick on for years, and still she would be lying, listening in vain. . . .

Maria, with mistaken officiousness, had risen once and gone to the mantelpiece to stop the monotonous clack that went on so loud, but Judy had cried out at the dreadful silence. Not that—anything but that. Without understanding, Maria had let the clock go on.

It was all very terrible to Maria, but she was full of curiosity. There was so much she was dying to ask ; so much more than the maid could tell her. She, on the alarm being given, had rushed up to look for her mistress, and found her lying on her bed. Of course, the woman had thrown herself down beside her, screaming, and Judy had heard the catastrophe from her lips, as soon as consciousness came to her.

The doctor had said that Mrs. Lauder was suffering from the shock. He had asked Maria to watch over her and see that she was

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asked no questions, and Maria had bridled her tongue with pain.

At last Judy, without lifting her face, without turning, spoke below her breath.

"Is he—dead?" she said.

"Oh, Judy, poor Judy," said Maria, "didn't they tell you?"

Her eyes were fixed on the fair head crumpled into the pillow, on the soft curve of Judy's neck. The maids had undressed her, put her into a thin muslin nightdress; and her arm lay bare and childish outside the coverlet. Maria had not yet seen her hidden face.

"Yes," said Judy. "They said—they said——"

Her voice faltered into silence, as if what had been told her once could not be repeated, but must be left to the dreadful uncertainty of thought. And then, all at once, she clutched the hand holding hers.

"He shot himself," she said. "He shot himself."

"Tell me," said Maria, in a soothing murmur. This was not asking questions. She leaned a little closer.

"He must have shot himself . . ." said Judy, in the same horror-struck, but persisting, whisper.

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"Yes—yes . . ." said Maria. Doubtless the servant's first cry had been of murder ; it must be ringing still in her ears. . . .

The girl moved, only to crush her face deeper into the pillow. Then at last she turned and let Maria see its desperate whiteness, and the wildness in her tearless eyes.

"There was nobody—there," she said. "Nobody who could—but himself. I think he was mad. He tried to frighten me. He was angry. What did I do to make him angry——? He struck me, and I remember falling. Nobody was there. . . ."

There was a livid mark on her forehead ; it showed plain as she lay gazing up at the other woman who was kind but could not divine what assurance she was beseeching of her.

"He must have carried me upstairs," she whispered, "and gone down—and shot himself."

Always the same piteous insistence, as if it were dragged from her by her own longing to hear it aloud, and so shut her ears to another thought. Maria was not subtle to catch that meaning.

"You don't remember any more?" she asked.

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"No," said Judy. "Only—somebody carrying me—very carefully, very gently—and laying me down again; a sort of half-conscious waking, afraid to look, afraid to lose the dream—and falling asleep. He never touched me like that before—he must have been—sorry. It could not—there was not—! There was not at all one here—but him."

"No," said Maria, vaguely understanding that she was implored to agree. "It must have been he. Poor Bill!"

Judy turned that sad, wild face away; her lip quivered.

"Oh——" she said. "I—I tried to be good to him."

It was all that she had to say of the man who had taken all and given her worse than nothing.

CHAPTER XIII

THE inquest was over.

It had been carried out with a discreet reticence that culminated in an open verdict. Lauder had been shot, whether by himself or another there was not sufficient evidence to show. The medical testimony was not conclusive; it admitted that it was possible for Lauder to have fired the shot—and the revolver had been found beside him.

It was generally believed that the jury had avoided a verdict of suicide out of sympathy with the widow, preferring to leave her the chance of clinging to the thought of an accident. Few seriously doubted that Lauder had met his death at his own hands. But strange things are always said, wild speculations are always rife, at times like these; and although public opinion as a whole took a sensible view of Lauder's tragic end, some were found to differ.

It was rumoured that the police were making

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some mystery about the revolver that had been found, had been working independently, while the coroner, rising superior to the ancient rivalry between the amateur and professional investigator, forbore to press points whose premature elucidation might hamper them, meekly subduing that natural vanity that occasionally magnifies the importance of an office.

And among those who refused to take the common-sense view and dismiss the matter as regrettable, but not surprising, having regard to the antecedents of the man—was Sophia Bland.

She made no outward show of mourning; came out hunting as usual, riding as carelessly as ever on borrowed horses. And she seemed not to notice the curious looks that were cast at her; the way talk dropped away as she rode into it. She did not care if her world chose to hint that she was morally responsible for what had happened, to accuse Lauder's infatuation for her as the cause of his downfall.

When she came upon discussion too suddenly she flung her word at the men who would have hushed each other in her hearing, declaring her unalterable belief that Lauder had not killed himself.

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"I don't like the way she takes it," said Lord Robert uneasily. "I'm not pretending that the rest of us cared for Lauder. But she—she did once, anyhow. Perhaps she feels a bit guilty, and that is why she insists that we're all idiots to stick to the obvious conclusion about a man who was capable of anything, judging by the way he carried on that last afternoon. What does she mean by it though? There's a vindictive look about her, a sort of 'I'm biding my time' suggestion. I hope she doesn't suspect *I* did it? What's the matter with Burkinshaw?"

He screwed himself round to stare at Maria's husband, who was passing him, and whose jolly aspect was uncommonly disturbed.

"Hi!" he said. "Magistrate! Has anybody applied to you for a warrant?"

Burkinshaw started visibly; checked his horse; rode on bursting with discomposure—and joined another man with whom he began a solemn confabulation. They drew away a little, shaking their heads. One magistrate may whisper to another things that cannot be divulged. Lord Robert pricked up his ears.

"There is something afoot," he said; "something blanching your cheek, Burkinshaw, and lending a furtive squint to your

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eye. Out with it. You aren't the kind of being to hug mysteries."

Burkinshaw looked at him pompously, breaking off his conference to utter a magisterial rebuke.

"It is not a case for levity," he said.

"If the police are really working like moles," retorted Lord Robert, unabashed, "I wish they'd throw up a little earth."

But he fell back on Rafferty.

"I am not really callous," he said. "I'd feel just as interested if it were my own funeral that made a sensation. Of course, it was a horrid shock hearing about Lauder; but that wears off. I wasn't what you would call astounded. And I can't help being amused at the idea of a mysterious criminal walking into his house to shoot him."

Rafferty acknowledged the justice of his remark.

"The very ones that suggest it," he said, "would be the first to drop down dead with amazement if it turned out so."

Lord Robert suppressed a gleam.

"If I were the unfeeling monster Burkinshaw insinuates," he said, "I'd invent a tale that yonder ferrety horse-dealer on the road is a detective mixing with us to run the

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murderer to earth. It could be done, Rafferty. I know lots of fellows who'd swallow it all and squirm as I hinted darkly at the direction of his suspicions——"

He sighed, relinquishing endless opportunities for untimely joking.

"All the same," he said, "there is something peculiar in the air. Burkinshaw won't be able to keep it long to himself; he is an arrant gossip. I'll hang on his skirts awhile."

But when the revelation came it was incredible. . . .

It leaked out at the close of the day when a muddy troop followed, more or less satisfied but reluctant to leave off, in the wake of hounds. The hearts of those in authority had been at last melted by the urgent entreaties of Stokes and Pinner, whose greatest ambition was that hounds should draw the spinney at the back of the Tin House, a distinction that they felt would make them immortal. They had used all the blandishments they could devise to induce a fox to take up his habitation in it. In the summer they had managed to catch a cub and had introduced him to a luxurious earth they had dug and lined with hay. For two or three days they had gone about their business as mum as mice, afraid to

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disturb him until he had settled in his new quarters, cautiously tiptoeing to the edge of the spinney to leave a nightly offering of a rabbit. He made no sign, but the rabbits went, and they fondly trusted that he was shyly keeping hidden. It seemed unlikely that such a fat, furry little beast could have acquired an exploring spirit.

Bitter was their disappointment one misty dawn to see a strange collie ranging in search of the tribute they had for once forgotten, and to find that he had been in the habit of calling round for it on his way shepherding. His master, whistling furiously on the other side of the hill, put the matter beyond a doubt. They dived into the charmed circle of wind-sown ashes surrounding the original three Scotch firs, and found it empty. The wicked cub had not spent a single night therein; had pelted back to the distant kingdom whence he had been carried, growling and snapping, hugged to Pinner's breast.

Kidnapping having turned out a failure, they resorted to milder plans to advertise a vacancy to the foxes; nearly poisoned themselves by leaving the carcass of a sheep in its vicinity, and bought fifty hens at an auction, religiously omitting to lock them up at night.

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But the miserable fowls cackled with impunity, actually roosting in the trees, and it was not until Stokes hit on the brilliant idea of stocking some pedigree Brahmas (it was not original, but had struck him on hearing the secretary of the hunt poultry fund enlarging on the wily discrimination of foxes between a prize bird and a barn-door fowl) that luck turned.

Soon after, Stokes, finding a minute to attend to duty, counting his chickens, without hope, purely from habit, raised a whoop of joy. Three of them had gone. It was indubitably a fox, although he had not bitten off their heads. And a fox having once found out the spinney, all swept and garnished, it seemed to them, full of faith, that he would not be able to resist popping in and out, seeking it as a refuge, even if he did not take up his abode there entirely. They sent in urgent appeals to the Hunt for a visit.

"Give the Babes a call," said Tokenhouse.
"They'd stand on their heads with pride."

He had strolled out of doors to behold what was going on, hearing the tramp of horses, and leaned over a gate watching hounds drifting by on their way to the last draw of the afternoon.

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The Master demurred.

"They have been pitching harrowing tales of depredations among their poultry," he said; "but foxes don't usually dine and sleep. I shouldn't think they'd forsake the Pastures for that draughty hilltop."

"Still, they might steal up there to keep out of the way," said Tokenhouse. "As to the hens—I met a gentleman the other night crawling through a fence with a bundle of feathers under his arm. And I asked him what he was up to——"

"Asked him?"

"Oh, well," said Tokenhouse, "he was a two-legged fox."

"The other night?" said Burkinshaw, and bit his tongue.

"Yes, that night," said Tokenhouse with intention.

Lord Robert glanced from one to the other.

"You look deuced uncomfortable, Burkinshaw," he said; "not to say guilty. You don't mean to confess it was you?"

Tokenhouse went on, ignoring Burkinshaw's disquiet at his allusion.

"I dare say you know who it was," he said. "Had some communication with him perhaps?"

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I advised him to make a clean breast of it, and it might not turn to his disadvantage."

Burkinshaw looked more ill at ease than ever.

"What happened?" said Lord Robert, who had not the key to this.

"We parted the best of friends," said Tokenhouse. "I was in a hurry and so was he. What he said was, 'Them innocents keeps fowls a purpose to entice the foxes; they're breakin' their 'arts over it, and it's crool to let 'em be disappointed, so I've been and fetched a couple.'"

"In that case," said the Master, "unless we are going to hunt your friend——"

"Oh, give them a look in," said Tokenhouse. "Just run your hounds through the spinney."

So it was that the Babes were plunged in the seventh heaven, finding themselves invested. It was a fine sight—hounds disappearing into the clump of trees, sniffing in and out—and actually a whimper. . . .!

"We've had a fox in," said Pinner with bated breath. "Perhaps he's in it now."

"When was it he ate your hens?" said Lord Robert, with his eye on Burkinshaw. The little band of riders, waiting for a last

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sally into the dusk, massed themselves on the left of the Tin House overlooking the hollow. The shadows were creeping up, casting a gloom on the house below.

"The night Lauder shot himself," said Stokes.

It was then that Lord Robert's quick apprehension jumped at a preposterous conclusion. He turned abruptly on Burkinshaw.

"You don't mean to say . . ." he exclaimed "that you actually——"

"I'd nothing to do with it," said Burkinshaw hastily. "I've only just been informed. . . . They didn't come to me for the warrant for his arrest."

"*What?*" said Lord Robert. His yell collected the rest of them round him; he burst into irreverent laughter.

"Tell 'em!" he said. "Tell 'em, Burkinshaw. *I* can't. It's not my fault if people turn a serious matter into a joke. I resisted the temptation myself—left it to the police. Tokenhouse—poor old Tokenhouse, as harmless as a fly——!"

Annoyed at this ridicule, Burkinshaw could contain himself no longer, but let out all he knew. And after a bit Lord Robert turned his horse and left them at it. Hunting, for that

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night, was over. Hounds, having riddled the cherished spinney in vain, were called away with due formality, leaving the Babes full of gratification at having been taken seriously at last. It did not matter so very much that the premises, having been drawn in state, had been found tenantless. The great thing was that the spinney had been recognised as no myth but a real fact.

Tokenhouse had been watching progress from the bottom.

"They are going on to Cream Gorse, I suppose?" he said.

"No, I think they are going home," said Lord Robert distractedly. "*I* am, at any rate."

He walked his horse alongside as they retreated.

"Burkinshaw has gone clean mad," he said. "He has been electrifying us up there—didn't you hear us hooting?—with a cock-and-bull story rather more absurd than anything I ever heard about you——"

"Oh, was he?" said Tokenhouse coolly. "I thought he was trying to keep it to himself. There's a fine scarecrow."

"It's a very well-dressed one," said Lord

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Robert, casting a wandering eye in its direction.

"The Babes put it up to guard their wheat," said Tokenhouse, "and to remind them of their man Johnson. He left in a hurry and forgot to pack the old dress coat he wore to keep up his dignity. They thought it would please the crows."

They had passed the object of his attention, and he resumed consideration of his companion's distracted air. His tone was that of one slightly amused at another man's predicament.

"I had rather a fancy to come out hunting myself this morning," he said; "not in my gig, you know, but in the old style—on horseback. However, I thought I had better not be out of the way—give no unnecessary trouble to the police."

"Then you know——" said Lord Robert.

"One can't help having an inkling of what is going on," said Tokenhouse. "I hope you'll do all you can to assist the course of—justice. For example, I don't wish anybody to minimise that row I had with Lauder at the Point-to-Point. It provides a motive."

"But you can't possibly want——" said Lord Robert, betraying his stupefaction.

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Tokenhouse bent to unlatch the gate at the back of the house, holding it open for the other to pass through ; and as he straightened himself he smiled.

" You think I have queer tastes ? " he said. " So I have. I should like to see the thing through properly. Say it's my sporting instinct. One doesn't often have an opportunity of learning what it feels like to be the fox. It's about the only thing I have not tried, and I'd like my experiences to be complete."

Lord Robert was consumed with admiration at so eccentric a point of view, one after his own heart, but certainly transcending anything he was capable of himself.

" I won't ask you to come in," said Tokenhouse, stopping at the door. " To tell you the truth, I'm expecting—other visitors, and I am afraid I shall have to devote all my attention to them."

Lord Robert went on his way, meeting two men in a high, black dog-cart, who saluted him gravely as they drove past. He was still inclined to look upon this development as a huge joke. But that it should have been played upon Tokenhouse, of all people—the last person in the world—— !

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As Tokenhouse went into the house he had a glimpse of Mrs. Crow peeping at him, with her apron ready to throw over her face. She too, it seemed, had an inkling. And Gay, hearing his step, came out of the library, walking a little stiffly, his face blank with consternation.

"Come in here for God's sake," he said hoarsely. "I've heard a most awful rumour."

He was not taking it lightly. He almost dragged Tokenhouse into the library and shut the door upon them. On the road there was a noise of wheels.

"One or two people have been good enough to warn me," said Tokenhouse. "You're not going to propose that I should hide myself in a cupboard? Don't worry, Gay. I am not at all surprised."

He sat down comfortably by the fire.

But Gay went on raging. There was no doubt of him in his face—only incredulous anger.

"Why don't they charge me?" he said. "Why should it be you? What have the fools got against you?"

"I believe they have got a witness who saw me out in the fields that night," said Tokenhouse.

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"But I was out too; I'll tell them so. I'll tell them you were looking for me," said Gay.

"You'll do nothing of the kind," said Tokenhouse. "Look here, Gay, this is my affair, my private—shall we say experiment? The man they have didn't see you. He saw me."

"But I'll swear I was there!" said Gay.

Tokenhouse laughed softly at his heat.

"You couldn't do much," he said, "without my corroboration. If you remember, you were hazy on the subject. How do you know you didn't dream it all? Don't spoil my case. I may be a little odd, but I am not altogether a fool. I won't have incautious friends ruining my plans by their rash declarations. I'll let you come forward later on and say whatever you have a mind to. Of course, I shall have a decent lawyer to defend me, and all that sort of thing."

He paused, looking on with an air of interested detachment at the younger man's agitation.

"I suppose," he said, "that I couldn't convince you that this business is an unlooked-for break in the monotony of my—existence. I had grown accustomed to thinking my life

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was practically over, but latterly—— Well, never mind! My one anxiety is lest the Bench may pooh-pooh the charge and refuse to commit me for trial. But I don't think they'll dare to do that. I understand that the police have discovered that the revolver in their possession belongs to me."

Gay went quickly across the room; hunted in a cupboard among the bookshelves, and turned round speechless.

"Yes," said Tokenhouse, "it's gone. Don't look so tragic. Careless of me, was it not?"

"Who took it?" said Gay, like a man confounded.

Tokenhouse looked at him, a quiet, long look that for the moment lost its sarcastic humour. He stood up.

"Thanks," he said.

And then, in his old manner, glancing at the door:

"Come in, Superintendent."

CHAPTER XIV .

LORD TOKENHOUSE'S arrest was the one topic at covert-sides ; scandal of the common sort paled before it. It was not often that Leicestershire enjoyed a like sensation to startle the waning season.

For the most part people stoutly took up his cause. He was too well known, too popular, for them to look upon such an outlandish charge seriously, until the police-court proceedings staggered their faith a little. What Tokenhouse had said to Lauder after the steeplechase in which he had made such a wonderful return to his former self, was brought forward as a proof of ill-feeling between the two. The fact that he had been seen in the fields that lay between the two houses on the fatal night, and the discovery that it was his revolver that had been picked up beside Lauder's body, made it look worse.

And Tokenhouse would offer no explana-

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tion, make no statement ; announced simply that he intended to reserve his defence.

"He was determined to make them send him for trial," said Lord Robert. "You could see that. Just stood there and smiled his provoking sort of sarcastic smile and declined to speak. Looked on and let 'em say what they liked, as if it didn't concern him."

"They say he'd been asking people to do him a service," put in Rafferty ; "asking them to brush up their knowledge of anything that might assist the prosecution and give them a stronger case."

"Not quite that," said Lord Robert, grinning. "But it sounds like him. It's his attitude. He means them to go on and clear him ; that's what it is."

"What I can't make out," said Rafferty, "is why on earth a man should go and drop his revolver. If I'd shot anybody, I'd take good care I didn't leave my weapon on the spot."

"Oh, would you ?" said Lord Robert. "I'll bet you'd make the same obliging slips as the rest. I can see you—a plausible villain till you'd committed your crime, and then losing your head and chucking down your

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dagger with a yell, and running off the stage as pale as any ghost."

"Anyhow," said Rafferty doggedly, "Tokenhouse wouldn't have done a stupid thing like that. It's the one circumstance that makes me sure he didn't do it."

"Unless," said Lord Robert, "he did it on purpose. I've several queer theories humming in my head, but I'll keep them to myself. It's a mercy the assizes are in March and we haven't long to wait. . . . There's that poor little lady says Lauder had a pistol of some sort—threatened her with it. If he had, what became of it?"

"Maria thinks she imagined that," said Rafferty. "The servants swore he had none to their knowledge. And, of course, she fainted."

"Hum," said Lord Robert drily. "I suppose the magistrates agreed with Maria. I'll tell you the one thing that made me feel queer, brought home to me that after all it was a matter of life and death—and you know it wasn't easy, with all of us cramming in, chattering as if the whole thing was too absurd—and old Tokenhouse like a sphinx, nodding to everybody, perfectly unmoved—was the sight of her all in black, lifting her

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great sad eyes, trying to answer. It nearly killed her. Maria says she is frightfully ill. They can't make her go through that again; they'll have to take her evidence on commission."

"I wonder how much she knows," said Rafferty ponderously. Lord Robert cut him short.

"Don't bring her into it," he said.

Rafferty stared at him. It seemed to his slower mind that he had run his head against one of these theories that Lord Robert named, one perhaps that he would fain have consigned to limbo.

"There goes Sophia," said Lord Robert in his usual tone. "What's become of the Infant? She hasn't pawned her, has she? I haven't noticed that imp of mischief cropping up in awkward spots for ages. The last time I did, she ran her pony between my horse's legs."

"She's got measles," said Rafferty, "or mumps or something."

They both watched Sophia till she was out of sight. Lord Robert was the first to comment.

"I've always heard," he said, "that tigers are lazy beasts; lick their lips in the sun

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until the right minute stirs them up. I don't know how it is, Rafferty, but she gives me that idea—a kind of lying in wait. They say when she heard that poor old Tokenhouse was taken up, she laughed."

"Most of us did," said Rafferty.

"That was because we took it as a tremendous joke," said Lord Robert. "But you don't expect a woman—and above all that woman——!"

Rafferty dropped into meditation.

Judy was ill.

She had been carried off by her cousin, packed into the cramped hunting quarters of Burkinshaw, where, at least, there were no painful associations. When the trial was over Maria was going to take her abroad. In the meanwhile she fussed over her kindly, if not always with understanding, mindful of the claims of cousinship. It was falsely told of her that her first remark on hearing of the catastrophe had been: "Poor girl, I must find her another husband!"

There was an undefined misgiving at the back of Maria's mind that she had not dared to share with her husband, or indeed breathe to anybody. Judy's piteous insistence that

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Lauder must have shot himself had first shaken her firm impression that he had. Awful possibilities rose up before her. She could not shut her eyes to them, remembering vague anxieties that had led her to confide in Tokenhouse and ask him to keep watch. The arrest of her confidant himself came upon her as an affair too ridiculous to be real.

She had gone abruptly to Judy with the news. Scorn of it made her careless.

"Whom do you think they are accusing of shooting poor Bill?" she had cried.

And Judy had sprung up and faced her, all one shiver, her face as white as a sheet.

"Oh——" she said, not asking anything, wavering towards her.

Maria never forgot the agony in her look, nor how it changed to an almost incredulous relief when she told her who it was, hastily gathering her in her arms, feeling as helpless as a man, unaccustomed to spending tenderness.

"It's an extraordinary mistake," she said in reassuring tones.

"Yes," said Judy faintly. Her heart was still beating irregularly upon Maria's awkward bosom.

That was before she broke down, while

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she was still holding on to a strength that was illusory, compounded only of the determination not to fail, not to let herself be shut into the careful silence of a darkened room, hearing nothing but what it would be thought wise to tell her.

She would sit in a little room at the back of the house with her hands interlaced, listening to the stifled noises reaching her from the one long, narrow village street that was a thoroughfare. Somebody was always passing, looking in to have speech with Burkinshaw or Maria, who liked this dwelling, for all its inconveniences, a hundred times better than the big house that had now a history, and had been shut away in a hollow. The ordinary life going on outside helped somehow to push away the horror that lay heavy on her; made it possible for her to breathe under the weight of what had been and of what might follow.

One afternoon, when the village had been more than common quiet, and Judy had heard no sound for a long time but the passing of a little party of second horsemen returning home and the rattle of a cart, there came all at once a stamping of horses under the porch

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and a man's voice asking for Burkinshaw, who was out.

She started—was not her heart tuned to vibrate to that voice among all others!—and stood up unconsciously as if it called her; held her breath to hear him speak again, leaning against the wall.

Maria, who had been in a little while, and was changing, put her head out of the window into the street, talking down to him. It was some message about a horse Burkinshaw was buying; he was to wire that night if he wanted him, and Gay had called round to leave an address.

"Go in and write it down," said Maria. "You'll find telegraph forms somewhere in the hall."

Judy heard him swing himself down, walk in, while the man with him held his horse. He was looking for the telegraph forms, turning over a litter of papers, dropping a book—his spurs clinked as he bent down to pick it up. So the trivial matters of life went on. It should have been enough to know him so near, to hear him moving, to wait for his voice again. . . .

She was turning the handle of the door; why she knew not; parting the curtains that

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hung before it, and standing between them, before she understood what she was doing. And then it was too late to turn back and fall again into the dreadful doubt that would not last longer than till he should look at her.

She would know then ; and the fear of knowledge was all at once worst of all.

He had his back to her still ; he was writing with the stump of a pencil, all he could find on the table, pushed into a corner of the ill-lit hall. She watched his hand travelling on the paper. That was all she could see of him—and the back of his head. Perhaps he would go without knowing—without knowing that she was there.

Suddenly he turned.

Judy had never seen him without a smile in his eyes, but now he was gazing at her as a man might who was haunted by a vision of some one dear to him that had died. Was it her piteousness in this strange black dress that made her look like a spirit ? Or was it a barrier in his soul ?

He did not come to her, but stood transfixed by the sight of her. Perhaps he had not known that she was in this house.

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"You're ill," he said, in a voice that was hushed and startled. "Are they taking care of you, Judy? Are they——"

Words came to her; not the words she wanted.

"I've something to ask you," she heard herself breathing. "Tell me——"

"Yes," said Gay.

Perhaps, after all, he dared not come any nearer, because he could not move without taking her in his arms.

She had dropped her tone to a whisper and paused, conscious of the horses fidgeting on the pavement, jingling their bits at the door; of Maria treading heavily overhead—of her weakness without anybody to lean on.

"Do you remember," she said, "once, when I was dizzy—carrying me into your house? I want to know——"

Yes, she wanted to know. Anything rather than live with that haunting recollection of being borne in the arms of somebody who cared—whose strength was very gentle. If it were but untrue——!

"Did you ever carry me like that . . . again?" she said. Her eyes looked into his, too desperate for shyness.

"Never," said Gay.

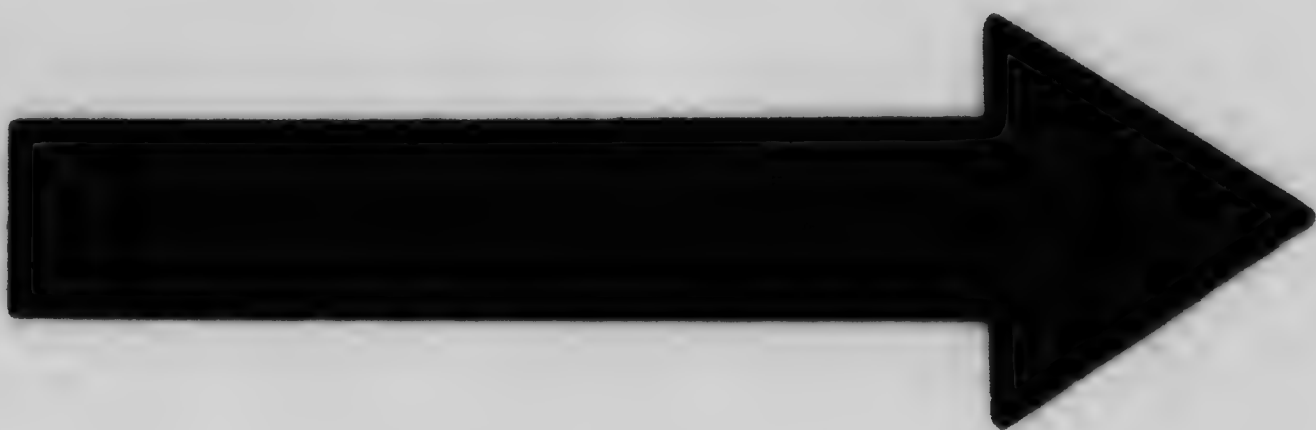
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"Ah, thank God, thank God!" she said, very low, hardly with her lips.

She had left him standing, staring, with that grave face. Let him think she was mad. . . . He must not hear her laughing. . . . And nobody but Maria, who could not understand, must find her, fallen in a heap too weak, too happy in a strain relaxed to reach the sofa where she wanted to lie for ever sobbing. The door was shut between them.

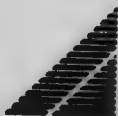
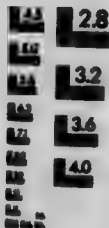
"For God's sake take care of her."

That was his voice, rough with distress, not anger nor horror. She felt as if she were rocking in a ship on a wild sea, but happy—oh, very happy. And she could give way at last.



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CHAPTER XV

“**PULL** the rug over your head. Try to look like a sheep,” said Stokes.

Pinner, on all fours, was doing all man could do with a baby's bottle to beguile a blackfaced lamb, tottering defiance; and Stokes was anxiously pushing it towards him.

They had been greatly astonished at its arrival, in fact, as Stokes put it: “The sheep didn't expect it either; she died of fright”; but they boldly determined to bring it up by hand. They took it into the Tin House and put it down by the fire, and Pinner had gone down to Gay's house and borrowed a sheepskin rug, while Stokes rode into town and stolidly purchased a feeding-bottle. Only the ungrateful little beast did not realise their intentions and butted feebly, wobbling on its unsteady legs, making a shrill and angry cry that seemed to ask deliverance from these monsters.

It was Pinner who had the good idea that saved them from defeat. He suddenly dipped

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his finger in the milk and stuck it into the lamb's open mouth. It sucked fiercely.

"Hooray!" he said. "That's it. The poor little beggar hates the taste of india-rubber. Let him sit down, Stokes; he won't buck into the fender."

He sat back on his heels, indulging the lamb with a milky forefinger. "It's rather a slow way of getting your dinner," he said. "I may as well throw the rug off; I believe he likes me best as I am. Who'd have thought it?"

"He doesn't get much," said Stokes, stooping over him with his hands on his knees.

"Not yet, but I'll educate him up to a spoon. It's a great thing, establishing confidence between us," said Pinner. "Don't you be sniffy. *I'm* the heaven-born farmer. Rule of thumb versus your old scientific methods. He thinks I'm his mother, bless him."

"Your face is black enough," said Stokes, who had been at the trouble of getting the despised infantine appliance, and brooking some derision as he dashed from shop to shop.

"I dare say it is," said Pinner. "I meant to wash it, but I couldn't lay hands on a towel. Never mind, it's clean soot. I was seeing to the stove. Isn't it splendid to feel you can do as you like? No Johnson."

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"We'll have to have a spring-cleaning though," said Stokes. "I can't find anything when I want it except the aunt's photograph. When I'm sweeping, it always tumbles on my head."

"I hope she doesn't come down on us in the body," said Pinner fervently, reaching out and tapping the wooden leg of the table to avert the omen. "She'll put an end to this life of unbridled ease. I've not had a collar on in private since Johnson left. Here, mister, you'll choke yourself ; don't be greedy. I say, how soon do you think we could wean him ? We might put a ribbon round his neck and send him up to her for a pet. He'd look neat trotting at her skirts in the park."

Somehow or other, the lamb had imbibed enough sustenance to make it sleepy. It shut its eyes and allowed Pinner to tuck it in a blanket. He rubbed it between its ears, a parting caress ; and stood back to gaze at it, gratified.

"He looks quite at home," he said. "The tide is turning. We'll make our fortunes yet. I'll go down and tell Gay."

"I'll come with you," said his partner.

"We can't leave the animal to keep house——"

"Oh, he's too young to get into mischief.

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He won't play with matches," said Stokes superiorly, and together they set off.

They were continually making excuses to look up their neighbour, more from a vague impulse of loyalty than their constant need of advice. They had thrilled to the marrow when he had stood in the witness-box and declared that Tokenhouse had been in search of him that night; when, impetuous and unguarded, he had poured out his wild statement of half-delirious wandering. In cross-examination he had been driven to admit that he had not remembered much until the prisoner confirmed his hazy recollection, and his evidence, without helping his friend as much as he had imagined, had been damaging to himself. It was Tokenhouse who was on his trial, but it had been at Gay that the murmuring listeners looked askance. There were not wanting those who recalled his passage at arms with Lauder, his hot championship of Lauder's wife. The man at Pinner's elbow had muttered words about people in the same house having access to the same places. It had been proved that Gay's lodger kept his revolvers in the library, where one of them had been found in its case, while the other had been picked up beside

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the man who had been shot, with three chambers empty. . . . The inference was damning, and Pinner had dug that elbow into him and glared his indignation, miserably conscious that this evil speaker was not the only one. The Babes at least were staunch.

They marched into his house whistling, affecting a great gaiety. Mrs. Crow, with the distrarht air that she held to be respectful to these troublous times, put her head out of the kitchen and, seeing who it was, sighed and set down their plates to warm. The thing she felt most, poor woman, was not Lauder's untimely end, nor the fearful charge that hung over her master's lodger—but her own unfortunate heavy slumbers that had prevented her from witnessing anything. She had missed the distinguished opportunity of her life, and disappointment made her tart. She took a gloomy view of the case, as violently as possible opposed to that of her husband, whose veneration of *the poor gentleman* had always been vexation in her ears.

Gay looked up from his solitary fireside at the entrance of his adherents.

"Have you come to have dinner with me?" he said. The Babes assented.

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They were dying to discuss the thing that was in all their minds, but dared not begin. It lay too dark, too troubled, on Gay's brow.

Instead, they plunged into agriculture, discussions about soils and cattle and microbes, the unassimilated fare of their studies, perilously mixed. Stokes was the theorist, Pinner the one who lived to upset his theories by, on a limited scale, putting them into practice. The one would lay down the law with the authority of the printed book, and the other bring out its artless refutation ; always final—"and then we tried it !"

But at last the time came when silence fell on their voluble, half-triumphant, half-rueful voices, and Gay lifted his glass.

"We'll drink to Lord Tokenhouse," he said abruptly.

"He's sure to get off, isn't he ?" said Pinner with bated breath.

The house was empty for want of its quieter inmate. Stokes glanced up suddenly as if he expected to see him, mildly contemptuous, in the doorway.

"They'll never find him guilty," he said with conviction.

"God forbid," said Gay.

"Why wouldn't he say a word himself ?"

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said Pinner. "Is it true he said it was too undignified, that he didn't choose to let himself be bullied by a pack of lawyers?"

"I think he prefers to look on," said Gay.

"Yes. He makes you feel as if it was a sort of game," said Pinner admiringly. "As if he wouldn't play because he was too strong for them. A little bored, awfully condescending. He's wonderful. What do you think he has got up his sleeve?"

Gay did not answer. He was bewildered himself, although long association with his lodger had taught him something of his unusual attitude towards the serious things of life. It was strange to him that any man could maintain his philosophic demeanour in the face of a terrible charge that changed him from a spectator into an actor. Tokenhouse, the humorous observer of other men, whose tolerant comprehension glanced over their foibles, their passions, food for his own unexcited contemplation—how was it possible that he of all men should be standing in the dock? To the other man, hot-blooded, raging in his perplexity, it was inconceivable that he should continue to wear a cool front, to look upon this too as a subtle joke.

Why, as Gay himself had gone into the

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witness-box, all eyes turned on him, all the crowd listening—he had felt an emotion that was liker fear than anything he had known. It came back to him; a kind of sickness. To get up and fight, to draw a hard breath and strike out for a friend—how simple! But to be shut in, to stand a mark for all men with his hands tied——!

He felt again that queer sensation of being trapped. He heard his impetuous words fall upon utter silence; and then a thin, deliberate voice cutting in, twisting what he had said till the sense was unlike his own, entangling him in some dimly apprehended net. He felt his throat dry, his heart pumping strangely. What was the sinister suggestion in the truth as he knew it? What was the inquisitor driving at? How if he and Token- had changed places, how if it had been Token- , instead of a voluntary witness, had been on trial for his life? The thought of it gripped him hard.

No; he could not imitate the prisoner's stoicism. If it had been his lot——!

“You are looking grim,” said Pinner.

“Am I?” he said, rousing himself to shake off a little of the trouble in his mind. “You

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don't know what I had to put up with yesterday" (yes, better try and lift the oppressing cloud by a pretence of lightness). "Lord Robert and I were in here discussing—things, when he looked out of window and said: 'So *that's* how Leicester is spending its Sunday afternoons.' And there was a brake full of boot-hands, drawn up in the road, the lot staring up at us, devouring sandwiches—as if my house was the Tower of London."

"Oh, I say, what did you do to them?" said Pinner, in delighted expectation.

"Lost my temper," said Gay. "Threw up the window and asked them what the devil they wanted here. And the driver, an impudent rascal who looked like a bit of leather, said they were visiting places of interest in the neighbourhood, and pointed to the house with his whip. I told him if he didn't move on I'd come out and thrash him."

"Ah——!" said Pinner.

Gay's disgust submitted to the absurdity of the reminiscence. He laughed bitterly.

"Lord Robert held me down," he said. "Clutched me and showed me a photographer taking aim. The other villain was inciting me to come on, with an eye to the sale of his picture postcards."

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The Babes giggled convulsively.

"It's almost a pity——" said Stokes, and choked.

"Yes, that's what Lord Robert said. That he deserved a medal for putting friendship first," said Gay. "If I hadn't been in such a towering rage, he'd have suggested pitching them a yarn full of horrors and asking sixpence each for showing them over the house. He's capable of acting showman: 'This is the bed the gentleman slept in. This is the notorious back door——' But to see these common brutes with their unwinking stare——! Well, it's life. You can stand the big blows; it's the ridiculous little smacks that drive things home to you and make you lose self-control."

"We'd better go," said Stokes, looking at the clock. And Gay did not try to keep them. Their company was not much more exacting than the friendliness of a dog, and there was distraction in their babble—but it didn't make a great difference. He scarcely missed them when they went out.

Clear of the house they peered with fascinated awe into the surrounding darkness.

"You and I sleeping like logs!" said

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Pinner lamentably, "when all that was going on."

"And that old hypocrite Ditcher stealing our hens——" said Stokes. "What did he pretend in court? That he was hunting for a hedgehog?"

"Yes. Swore that a fellow who was breaking in two young horses had asked him to get him a hedgehog skin to keep 'em from rubbing against the pole. Wasn't a bit abashed when they asked him if it had feathers."

"What tickles me," said Stokes, "is that born idiot Johnson bolting up the hill as ignorant as a fish. He might just as well have been a bit later or earlier or whatever it was, and looked about him."

They halted. There was a weird interest in the gloom; it caught their imagination, prickled in their hair as they tracked out the probable scene of Gay's midnight vagary; the little distance he had staggered according to his own unsupported story—and marked the stile where the witness had blundered into Tokenhouse, abroad so late. Far in the deeper darkness lay that house shadowed by its history. The Babes moved instinctively closer to each other.

All at once Pinner burst into an hysterical

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fit of laughter, pointing to the black shape presiding, with the same air of reproachful dignity that had distinguished the unlamented Johnson, over their field of wheat.

"I was thinking," he said, "if he saw himself planted out there all night, he'd shudder in his skin."

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CHAPTER XVI

IT was Sophia Bland who furnished the surprise of the trial.

When she was called as a witness the prisoner leaned forward, slightly smiling, but her expression was inscrutable, although she gave him a little nod.

"And you couldn't have guessed," said Lord Robert with relish, "whether she meant to bless or curse. Of course, Tokenhouse and his counsel must have known all about it, but none of *us* had the faintest notion. And, though she's lazy, there's an unexpectedness about Sophia. She might have come out with anything under the sun by the look of her."

What she had to say was brief. Her little girl had carried off the revolver now in the hands of the prosecution—one that Tokenhouse had lately been using and had presumably left out within reach of wicked little hands. Lauder had got it from her. She

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had asked him to give it back to its owner, and he had said carelessly that there was no hurry. The last she had seen of it had been in his possession.

Gay, sitting back in court, took a deep breath.

"What has she been playing for?" said Lord Robert. "Keeping it to herself all this time, never giving a hint, and all of us racking our brains over the one thing that looked—well, looked—you know! D'you suppose that Tokenhouse asked her to hold her peace, or was it pure devilry? If she'd gone to the police and told them at the beginning they'd never have had the impertinence to go on. Didn't he miss the thing?"

"What? No," said Gay. "He mightn't look for it till he wanted it. I don't know whether he knew or not."

"Well, it was the one thing that stuck in my throat," said Lord Robert. "It looked queer, finding it where it was. Oh, well, if Sophia wanted to be dramatic, she's got her wish. You hear them—*Applause in court!* What with your imprudent——" he dwelt a little on the word—"revelations, and this story of Sophia's, the prosecution haven't a leg to stand on. Who says now that Lauder

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didn't shoot himself ? We'll give old Tokenhouse a reception when he comes out ! ”

“ I'd like to stand up and shout myself hoarse,” said Gay.

“ Wait a bit,” said Lord Robert.

But he felt he could understand the other man's agitation. Tokenhouse had taken no man into his counsels, and that incident of the revolver had seemed inexplicable. Without disloyalty a man might be excused extravagant thankfulness on hearing its explanation.

Surely there could be no doubt now in the minds of men that Lauder had frightened his wife with this weapon—no figment of a girl's overwrought imagination—and afterwards shot himself. Surely—and still there might always be a few who would build up an injurious scandal from the ruins of this preposterous charge, who, daunted by the popular scorn, would exonerate Tokenhouse to fix on Gay. They would rake up the damning story of his scene with Lauder down by the brook below Melton Spinney, of his hot-headed threat. And they would put down Tokenhouse's silence to no oddity of his own, but to the desire not to implicate his friend. Perhaps—Lord Robert whistled softly as the idea struck him—it was some such idea that

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had possessed Sophia Bland. Supposing she had fancied the revolver *had* been returned; supposing she had held back as long as she could to force a man in peril of his life to weaken and speak out——?

He bent forward with his hands on his knees, his glass screwed in his eye, watching her as she tasted her dramatic moment. No, the thought was untenable. She was simply a vain, heartless, and stupid woman. But it was odd that she, with that knowledge in her possession, had all along refused to admit that Lauder had killed himself—she who knew his recklessness better than any other. Strange instance of the illogical instinct—no, not instinct, the gods forbid!—that was not the word; the illogical stubbornness of woman.

Tokenhouse's acquittal was popular.

His arm was stiff with shaking hands before he was seized upon by Gay and got away from the triumphing of his friends. The jury had not taken long to consider their verdict; there had been no dragging hours of doubt after the judge had summed up and left the case in their hands.

"We'll get in by dinner-time," said Gay.
"I've asked everybody to keep away. You

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must be dead tired. I'll let them all inundate you to-morrow."

"I feel rather dissipated," said Tokenhouse "Rather as if I had been attending a play in China; an entertainment that palls on you day after day. And public sympathy is a trifle wearing. I shall be glad to sink into obscurity."

He dropped naturally into his old place in the house; accepted Crow's assiduous valeting with the same understanding twinkle that signalised his appreciation of the fearful interest betrayed by Mrs. Crow.

"It is pleasant to be back," he said, as he settled himself in his comfortable, shabby chair. "Has that good woman held her hand and spared to sweep everything I had touched into a bonfire? I rather expected to find all traces of my occupation dusted out of the house."

Gay smiled. It was good to see him sitting there unaltered, fastidiously rolling his cigarette.

"I think Crow promised terrible things if she laid a finger on the library," he said. "In his humble way he wanted you to step into your old place and find it untouched, down to that box of matches."

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"Ah," said Tokenhouse, "imitating his politeness, are you postponing discussion of past events, or is there anything you would like to ask?"

"No," said Gay, but his face changed; he looked down. "Nothing."

"Go on," said Tokenhouse quietly.

"I won't do it," said Gay. "I'll not be less—polite than the Crows. You know best why you tried to make me hold my tongue when there was already a witness who had seen you out that night, why you didn't speak out yourself."

Tokenhouse looked at him thoughtfully.

"I'm afraid," he said, "you'd hardly understand my motives. Put it down to my eccentricity. Say to yourself: 'the poor old chap is cracked, he can't behave like ordinary people.' Or conclude that I wanted to clear myself of a ridiculous suspicion without bringing anybody else into it. It's a whim of mine to reserve my explanation."

He looked round the room, musing on its familiar and comfortable disorder.

"Pity," he said, half to himself. "I had got accustomed to this peaceable existence. I shall be sorry to turn out, Gay."

"What do you mean?" said Gay, startled.

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"An inward impulse to migration," said Tokenhouse. "You'll have to look out for another lodger. I have a curiosity to go up and down the world for a bit. It may be a temporary restlessness. I may drift back to my old haunts like the birds, later on."

He blew a thin spiral of smoke into the air and watched it fading into nothing, then spoke more gravely.

"What's the matter?" he said. "What's the trouble with you?"

Gay tried no dissimulation. He met the point-blank interrogation with a straight answer. Since Tokenhouse could read so much, could see what lay under his real gladness in the other man's triumphant return to his roof, let him know. . . . He looked up, haggard.

"She thinks I did it," he said.

"*She?*"

"Yes," said Gay.

Tokenhouse did not ask more. There was only one woman who could bring that look to the other's face.

"That's a mad thought of yours," he said.

"I saw her," said Gay. "She—it was an accident. I had called at Burkinshaw's on some business. And she came—she asked

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me—— She thought it was I who had carried her upstairs that night. And if she thought that, Tokenhouse——”

“Yes, I suppose it follows,” said Tokenhouse slowly. “Did she tell you why?”

“No,” said Gay. “I didn’t understand at the time. I was so knocked over by the sight of her, so white, so strange—— Only afterwards, when I’d lost her face, her words came back to me. What sort of a cur must she think of me, Tokenhouse, letting you——”

Tokenhouse was looking at him queerly.

“Don’t take it hard,” he said. “She has had a bad time. Forgive her a few strange fancies. Is Maria looking after her?”

“Yes,” said Gay. “They are going to take her away with them for the summer. Tokenhouse, you don’t see the horror of it. She told Maria once it could not have been her husband who carried her to her room, that it was somebody who cared for her. It was when she was so ill that she didn’t know what she was saying. But who cared for her but I——? That she should think me a murderer!”

“Oh, she said that, did she?” said Tokenhouse. “Poor child, poor unhappy child. She thought it was somebody who cared for

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her, because her husband had never been gentle to her before ; and so she pitched on you ? Don't look so desperate, Gay. The whole world knows your crippled condition, and even taking for granted your attempt at an expedition, it was agony to you to lift your arm. Let her get over the shock and she'll think of that. Don't you see it was because you were the one person she imagined would come to her help that she had that wild idea ? No, I should not despair."

It seemed to the other man as if Tokenhouse were amused at something, some point that had escaped Gay's attention ; and also as if he were hesitating ; coming to some decision. But he continued carelessly.

" It didn't strike you," he said, " that she might perhaps not identify the person who lifted her after she had fainted with the one who fired the fatal shot ? I am only throwing out a suggestion. Lauder might have shot himself, or let us say, though it sounds unlikely, been shot, before anybody came. And some one might have found her lying beside him unconscious and tried to spare her the shock of coming to herself where she was. How do you know that was not her idea when she thought of you ? "

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"Because," said Gay, "when I said she was mistaken she said—'Thank God!'"

Tokenhouse had treated his broken confidence as if it were hardly worth taking in earnest until then.

"You fool!" he said. "She believed you—and you go brooding over that."

His voice was sharp with anger and an echo of relief.

"Try to be reasonable," he said, restored again to his philosophic calm. "Give her a little time to blot out this, but don't let it come between you. Put her first. If you think you can make it up to her better than another man, don't hang back. Why should you? *You* haven't stood in the dock charged with shooting a man who deserved no less."

He looked whimsically across at Gay, putting down seriousness as a thing impossible to maintain.

"I wonder," he said, "if I am the only person who owes a gipsy longing to his sojourn in prison? The feeling of captivity, the feeling that you can't get out, is one I had never known. I am not sorry. It has done a lot for me, helping me to discover with a sort of moderate rapture what's open to me now, to realise that no corner in the world, however

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hidden, however distant, is forbidden to my foot. You have to lose your liberty, Gay, before you can taste it properly. The last few weeks have taught me something of the joy of wandering anywhere you choose. I am beginning to map out journeys."

CHAPTER XVII

A WHITE fog lay thick over the pastures as Gay started out cubbing one morning in late September.

His horse snuffed the damp mist, plunging into it, lost in it awhile, until a gate rose out of the invisible, and a path tracked itself dimly in the long, wet autumn grass. The country was all asleep.

Gay passed like a phantom along two or three shrouded fields, and let himself out into a byroad, exchanging his silent canter for a rapid trotting that could not distance the unearthly echoes following him in the fog. Weird and solitary was the lane he travelled, until awakened by a blind clattering of pursuit as the Babes rushed up on either side, brushing the hedges, having achieved the hard feat of rising before the dawn.

They hailed him warmly as their sunburnt faces loomed out of the white blanket.

"Don't look at us," said Pinner. "I know we are ragamuffins; but it's not easy to be

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smart when you oversleep yourselves and have to grope all in a minute for your clothes, only too thankful to lay hold of anything that feels like breeches. Joseph, the lamb, walked in yesterday afternoon and ate up the candles—cannibal that he is."

"Why cannibal?" said Gay.

"Aren't they made of mutton fat?" said Pinner. "What I mind is, we're quite respectable at present, but in two or three hours we'll be a mark of derision in a blazing sun. We'll slink home directly there's an end of playing hide-and-seek."

"There won't be many out," said Gay, trying not to laugh at the result of their hasty toilets as he consoled them.

"I don't know," said Stokes. "I heard the Burkinshaws had come down"—he glanced at Gay rather shyly—"and Lady Sophia Bland. She'll see in a minute that I've tied a handkerchief round my neck because I couldn't lay hands on a tie or a pin in the dark."

The Burkinshaws! Gay had not heard that. He thought they were still in Scotland. His heart leapt at the hope of news, and his horse quickened his pace in sympathy with the quicker pulse of his rider.

"There they are!" said Pinner, putting on

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a spurt and flinging back the gate he dashed through. They had risen on higher ground; across a field came the cry of hounds busy in a cover.

He halted a little way on and laughed.

"Funny how the noise catches you," he said, "and makes you all anyhow with excitement when you know you've got to hang about for hours watching 'em playing games with each other and cracking your whip to keep 'em in instead of holloaing them away. I like that though. It feels unlawful and upside down. Whoosh, you beggar——!"

He made a sally, driving back the smallest cub of the litter stealthily trying to escape the dusting that was going on, before he was let out of school.

Already the sun was dissipating the fog, sign of a brilliant morning, and the handful of riders loitering at the covert-side ceased humping their chilly backs, and talked of stealing a run before it became too hot for scent. Rabbits were scuttling in all directions among their horses' feet, and now and then a reddish mask peeped out and vanished back into the hurly-burly.

"Here, you sluggard!" called Lord Robert,

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an unusual spectacle in a short jacket and cowboy hat, far removed from his winter primness. "We have been airing the day for you more than a hour. Is Tokenhouse with you ?"

Gay rode in beside him, trampling the wet grass that grew tall and wild in a tangle of honeysuckle.

"He turned up unexpectedly the other night," he said. "On his way somewhere. He said he'd stroll out later and see what we were doing."

"Sophia Bland will be glad of that," said Lord Robert. "She's spent the whole summer trying to hit on his whereabouts. I did nothing but knock up against her. No, she's not here yet ; she is one of the idle ones who gather after nine o'clock when we busy bees are thinking of going home to breakfast. Lazy tactics. Start with hounds, say I, and stay your stomach with a blackberry."

He suited the action to the word and made a wry face, for it was unripe.

"How are you ?" he said. "Been down here all the while vegetating ? Have you got any decent horses ? D'you know, Maria came up to me in Bond Street one fine day and asked me if it was true that people in

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Leicestershire were looking black upon you. I said *I* wasn't. Rather a joke that!"

Gay did not join in his amusement; he looked stonily in front of him.

"I told her," said Lord Robert easily, "that even in Leicestershire there were a few ill-conditioned louts. That if she liked I'd undertake to spread a report that she'd poisoned her grandmother. I said there would be no difficulty in raising a party of true believers among the yokels. She didn't like it."

"Don't, like a good fellow——" said Gay. The jocular allusion to something of which he could not be ignorant jarred on him.

"There's nothing in it, is there?" said Lord Robert. His blank dismay was ludicrous and surprised Gay into a half-bitter smile.

"Well," he said, "you haven't been down here for the last few months."

"No," said Lord Robert, "the gods be thanked. I bolt out of the country the day after Croxton Park. Can't stand the plague of emptiness, the plague of silence that falls upon the earth. With the spinneys rank with meadow-sweet and the lanes buried in roses smothering them like wreaths at a funeral—and not a sound to break the un-

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hallowed stillness, but the yelling of the cuckoos——! Ah, there's Maria herself looking just like a jolly farmer—and the last time I saw her she was vapouring in a tail."

Gay had already recognised the two figures in the clearing distance, coming along the headland in the stubble field on his right. He listened distractedly to his companion's tattle, watching these two taking up their station at the other side of the hedge. What was he afraid of that he did not ride up to them? He might wait for ever before Lord Robert arrived, in his casual history of things and people, at the one name of interest to him. Had he a reason for leaving her out? Did he fancy himself discreet? What was he saying now——?

"The indefatigable Maria's been laying plans. She's a plotter who never cries Peccavi. But it's rather too soon after that last fiasco. I suppose she thinks one marriage will drive out the other. But the worst of Americans is you can't trust 'em. They are too eager to see themselves in the public eye. I wouldn't bet against him employing a press agent to make him famous as the man whose wife was the heroine of a fashionable tragedy, etc. etc.,

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and revive the story every time he gives a dinner-party."

"What are you talking about?" said Gay. But he knew. That rush of blood to his head told him. It was of her—of *her*. What could a man wish but that she should find happiness? And would she not find it surest in a future that offered forgetfulness of all that belonged to her past?

"Common gossip," said Lord Robert, and flicked at the bushes. "Coloured a bit by private prejudice. The man is presentable. I saw him once or twice."

"And she——?" said Gay.

"I should imagine," said Lord Robert, "that she asked nothing better than to be lifted clean out of it all. I'll do Maria the justice to remark that she sees to that. Nothing like making a clear sweep of old associations. I didn't know she was pretty. There's a look in her face when she smiles—— I don't know what it is, but it's like the sunrise."

Having riddled the cover from end to end and taught its inhabitants that there was no peace in it, they were letting the cubs away. And then eagerness was indulged in just one gallop, one short frolic up the stubble, over

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the tangled, bramble-choked hedge into the wide, low meadow, where it was like riding through a river, so wet the thick eddish was with dew; and on lower to the willows, crossing the summer-dried brook that was nothing but mud and rushes. And then back to work, invading another stronghold.

Late comers were dribbling on to the scene, coming to swell the band that had been there from the beginning, appearing in single spies. The Babes patted their panting beasts, full of grass, as they pulled up after the run, and sighed.

"It's about time we went," said Pinner. "We're expecting a telegram from the aunt. Have you heard the latest? She wants us to marry a mar't-gardener."

"A s'-demi-cousin of our own," said Stokes. "A good, practical girl," she says. She sent us her photograph out of a ladies' paper. In great boots, with a scowl like a fiend incarnate, digging in the sun."

"If we were to amalgamate," said Pinner, "she'd make us spend the rest of our lives weeding radishes."

He leant back in his saddle and pushed the rumpled hair off his forehead, relaxing into a grin.

"The aunt is too full of plans for our good,"

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he said. "And this would be worse than Johnson. We couldn't do it. Besides, Stokes—he'll deny it, but it's true—is madly in love with a languid lady who writes poetry, and she's studying field flowers by way of qualifying for a farmer's wife. So I'm the eligible party, and I'm going to tell her I've been engaged from my cradle. No marriage of inconvenience for us. We're too young and tender. She'll have to let us muddle on by ourselves."

Gay was inattentive. He was still making up his mind to approach Maria, wondering at his own backwardness. Burkinshaw he had greeted already, shouting a word or two at him that had no relation to the question that would have sounded all right if he could have brought it out naturally. Why should he not? Why not bluntly ask after Judy as any other acquaintance would?

They had moved on to a little wood, a cover roofed in with spreading trees, divided by one dark ride running up the middle. A few of them bustled into its depths, or craned their necks over the gate to watch the cubs darting across the ride as hounds chased them from one side of the wood to the other under the waving bracken. The rest scattered, principally on the hitler side.

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Gay turned into the wood, passed down the ride, and let himself out at the further gate where the wood ended in a fringe of nut-bushes sprinkled with ripening hazels and a few ash trees, all whispering leaves waiting till the first frost should bring them shivering down in a night, leaving the branches stripped of their restlessness. There was a floating veil of gossamer on the grass, and the sun was turning the cobwebs that sheeted the hedge into a glistening mist of silver.

And then, quite suddenly, Gay was deaf to the cracking of whips and all the confusion in the wood behind. Like a man whose eyes were dazzled, he stared and tried not to cheat himself with vain imagining, tried to keep steady against the mad conviction that would not be gainsaid. She it was, coming with the sun in the magic morning.

He could not wait to be sure when his heart warned him; could not school himself. There was just the one thing to do, to reach her and fling himself off his horse, and hold her hands fast in his.

Why, they were laughing, as if they had been children who had lost each other for a while in the dark. . . .

Still holding her hands, the man looked at

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her with a thirsting eagerness that would not be quenched. How slight she was, how girlish—what a young thing to carry the tragic knowledge that had darkened the trustfulness in her eyes. And fear smote him. Perhaps it was not his lot to teach her how to be happy.

"Are you with the Burkinshaws?" he said.

Judy made no attempt to release herself. She smiled up in his face like the spirit of the dawn, who had come wandering over the dim grasses, and might like them have been clad in silver.

"Yes," she said. "Maria did not want me to come, but I—I had nowhere to go alone. She offered to lend me a great, empty house in London. She said——"

But what Maria, in her surprise, had said was not worth repeating. She brushed it aside.

Gay let go her hands. His half-incredulous joy in the miracle was dashed. He came to himself, and the fall from the heights was bitter.

"Do you know what they are saying of me?" he asked abruptly.

Ah, how like her, that quick movement to

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him ; how like her that unconscious impulse of protection, so dear and so absurd. . . .

"I know," she said bravely ; "that was why I came."

"But you don't understand," said Gay, fighting against enchantment.

It was horrible to have to tell her, but it would be unfair to hold his peace. "It's a thing that stands between us——"

Judy laid her hand on his arm, a small, soft hand that fluttered, but could not be shaken off. The charm of its touch made him still.

"If I did not understand," she said, "I might have been too proud. But you want me."

"Darling—darling—darling !" said Gay under his breath ; "you'll never know how I want you."

The colour came into her face ; she let her eyes fall from his, but lifted them quickly, too eager in his cause to falter. His horse, standing like a dog by his shoulder, turned his head wistfully, listening to the sounds in the wood. The trees were whispering overhead.

"And couldn't you guess," she said, "that it was just that would bring me ?—the first

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word that reached me, the first word of slander. I had to let them all see that I believed in you. They can't think such terrible things of you, if *I*—his wife——”

She left it unspoken.

Gay bent and kissed that little defending hand. Was that her thought, an impulse to put herself between him and calumny? Had she not at all weighed the chances of the scandal smirching her? Could he suffer her to fling herself into the balance twice? She had said once that she did not ask to be happy, she only wanted to be kind. . . . Poor, fragile straw, who had tried to save one man from his ruin; was the same impetuous charity blinding her that had wrecked her in that sad failure? Ah, but it should not. She must not come to him like that.

“Judy,” he said, and the strangeness in his voice startled her. “Look at me, look straight at me. If I said to you—you are wrong, you can't help me, can't fight my battle—you can only harm me—would you give yourself to me all the same?”

His eyes held hers and her breath came fast as if she were frightened; she had turned pale. A great gladness moved him to unsteady laughter.

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"Don't waste your pity on me, my heart," he said. "I am not a coward. I am asking you to be selfish for the first time in your life. Will you?"

"Yes," she said, shutting her eyes with a sigh on his breast.

The Babes interrupted, bursting round the purlieus of the wood, pursuing an imaginary brush among the bushes with unregarded turmoil. Hounds and huntsmen were too busy inside to attend to their false alarms. They pulled up, unable to dissemble their boundless astonishment at the sight of Judy, and scrambled off, breaking into exclamation. Was she staying at Somerby, had she been out long? Why was she on foot, and how on earth had she found them? Their greetings tumbled over each other, until a brilliant idea occurred to Pinner and kept him for a minute dumb.

"I say—oh, I say——" he stammered. "Come in to us for breakfast. You must be awfully hungry, tramping in that wet grass. Never mind the cubbing. They'll be dangling round here for hours. It's not far; three fields up the lane, three fields after you reach the barn, and there you are. We'll ride on ahead and cook it."

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She looked at Gay, smiling, doubtful.

"Why not?" he said.

The delighted hosts scampered on, urging their sluggish horses, and disappeared simultaneously through a gap in the fence beyond.

Gay slung his reins on his arm and led his horse, walking with Judy until they had left the wood behind them, with its bustle of hounds and riders skirmishing in and out. The sun was up; hedges and grass alike were glittering, all splendid with little stars.

He swung himself into the saddle and held out his hand to her.

"Put your foot on mine," he said, "and ride with me."

Judy was no afraid. She set her foot on his, firm in the stirrup, springing upwards, sitting in front of him in the saddle.

"You won't let me fall?" she said.

He laughed, letting his horse go on, and keeping her steady with his arm.

"Lean back," he said. "You can't fall. I'm sure of you like that. I can teel you are real, and not that ghost that you used to be. Lean against me, Judy. This isn't the world—it's heaven;—and it was made for us."

The hospitable Babes, making haste, flew

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swiftly into the Tin House to begin preparations, pulling off their coats to the hot adventure of the frying-pan. Stokes, grasping a broom, tackled their curiously furnished interior, and Pinner, casting a wild glance into the larder, seized a basket and sprinted down the hill.

He was on his way back with a fresh loaf and a ham that he had lifted under the eyes of Mrs. Crow, too hurried to explain why he was thus unceremoniously borrowing—as Gay and Judy finished their mad ride, and she slid through his arms to the grass. Running like a deer, Pinner nearly bumped into them at the bottom of the hill, and, realising his half-clad appearance, cut back into the stubble and plucked the decent black coat, rain-stained and greenish, but still respectable, off the scarecrow that had stood all the summer in the wheat. Thus attired, he ran up to them.

“A shirt’s all very well, but a torn shirt——!” he said. “It’s not the thing to receive a lady in. Nothing like presence of mind.”

And he bowed them up the hill like a major-domo.

CHAPTER XVIII

"I WANT to talk to you, Tokenhouse," said Sophia Bland. She pulled up her horse beside him and stretched out her hand. There was an under-current of eagerness in her voice, as if something was come to her for which she had waited long

"And I——" he said, "am delighted to talk to you, Sophia."

He looked at her without significance, without surprise, and she laughed.

"Then we are both content," she said; "but I can't shout at you over a gate-post. Come in this evening."

"I think not," said Tokenhouse. "No. If you don't mind, Sophia, I won't come to your house. Let us have our day of reckoning in the open."

"But that is absurd," she said. "You talk as if we were enemies and not old, old friends. You aren't afraid of me?"

"No," he said, smiling. "I have no reason to be afraid."

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Lord Robert popped up on the other side of the fence. Scent was bad, and he had been wading into the nettles, trying to disturb a cub that he imagined lying low in the bottom of an open drain, while hounds were leaping backwards and forwards over his head.

"Run him to earth, have you?" he said. "Clutch him, Sophia; he's slippery. Before you know it he'll be gone, and next time you meet him it'll be in Japan. Woa, you brute!"

He switched the reins back over his horse's head and climbed on to him.

"It's about time we left off," he said. "What do you mean by strolling out to look at us, Tokenhouse, when the fun is over? We've raked three covers fore and aft, and earned a few crab-apples. I can't think why we're starving, with all these mushrooms about and these branches full of sloes behind you there. Look at the purple bloom on them! Try one, just one of them, Sophia."

"Don't," she said; "you set my teeth on edge."

"You're too sophisticated," said Lord Robert. "You aren't a child of Nature. By the way, there's an extraordinary rumour going round."

It was a rumour that had spread like wild-

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fire, tossed from one man to another in the last half-hour. He read knowledge of it in Sophia's face, and checked himself to marvel at her expression. She had the smile of a dangerous woman pleased.

Lord Robert was at a loss. He was annoyed at his own stupidity that could not divine what purpose of hers was served by this tale, true or false.

"It was Burkinshaw himself started it," he said. "I heard him puffing round the corner of the wood to tell Maria. And she took it with resignation, didn't even snap at him to hold his tongue. He hates cubbing; says it's dull, and rolls his eyes around like an animated cod-fish looking out for a bit of gossip. He may have made it up to pass the time. I think I'll ask him."

"It's probably true," said Sophia, with ostentatious carelessness which did not deceive Lord Robert.

"What do you say, Tokenhouse?" he inquired. "You are back in your old quarters; you know everything, of course. Don't be too discreet. Give us your opinion."

Tokenhouse shifted his position, leaning on the fence. One young hound, pursuing a vain suspicion, pushed past him into the

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open, and then, disappointed, turned back again. He stooped to help him over the bars.

"I am only down here for a day or two," he said. "I've become a vagabond. Gay has not consulted me—yet; but on the whole I am disposed to agree with Sophia."

She looked at him; her voice became soft and wheedling.

"I shall expect you this evening," she said. "Don't be churlish."

Tokenhouse did not answer her immediately. He seemed to be considering. Finally, a curious little smile came and settled on his mouth.

"Very well," he said, "I'll come."

"I stood by you, didn't I?" said Sophia Bland.

He had known that he would at last reach that subject, that the trivialities with which they pretended to amuse each other would suddenly give place to this. It was for the woman to make the first move, and he knew if he kept indifferent she would make it.

"Yes," he said.

She leaned forward, the laces slipping back from her arms, the light shining in her hair, smiling too.

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"And you never thanked me," she said plaintively.

"My dear Sophia," he said, "surely I was not so ungrateful."

"Not in the way I want to be thanked," she said, "not with your confidence."

"Isn't that rather a dangerous gift?" said Tokenhouse. "I might bore you, or burden you with too many secrets. Why not let sleeping dogs lie, Sophia?"

"Did you ever know a woman who could?" she said, and laughed. "Leave us in the dark and we're villains. Trust us and we are dumb."

Tokenhouse looked at her keenly.

"Is that why," he said, "I find some weak idiots looking with knowing ill-favour at Gay, repeating the . . . circumstances of what happened here . . . winter? I thought by this time it was fairly well established that Lauder had shot himself. What have you been doing it for, Sophia?"

She did not defend herself against his penetration.

"It is only human," she said, with her eyes on him, "that people should ask themselves why you wouldn't give evidence on your own behalf. Gay said that you had gone out to look for him; you were the only

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person who knew if what he said were true—and you never spoke. You are an odd person, Tokenhouse; if it had been anybody else there could only have been one opinion of your unaccountable behaviour—but since it was you, it was put down to all sorts of eccentric reasons. And some of us are convinced you were silent to shield a friend.”

“And, therefore,” he observed, as if the thing amused him, “you determine to ruin Gay? You suggest to a pack of credulous fools that if he were fit to get out of bed he was fit to possess himself of my other revolver—the one that was found in its case clean and loaded—and break into another man’s house, and shoot steady——”

He had smoked his cigarette to the stump, then threw it into the fender and lit another.

“I should like to know,” he remarked, “whether you pronounce him able to take the precaution of closing the window-shutter, and, after baffling my search, to get home unseen, reload and put away the weapon he had used—all that before collapsing. Or do you think I took charge of that part? Please gratify my curiosity.”

His manner was perfectly unconcerned.

“Bill never shot himself. He never shot

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himself!" cried the woman suddenly. Her breast heaved; she could not play her part after all.

"You think so?"

"I should have known," she said, defiant in her past knowledge of the man. "He would have warned me—he would have threatened."

"Poor Sophia!" said Tokenhouse. There was a human note in his voice. "Were you fond of him after all?"

For a minute she struggled for breath, but it was a laugh that came; she looked at him very strangely.

"No," she said. "No, I wasn't. Don't think that of me, Tokenhouse—that I could be so humble—slavish——! But I can't bear them all saying he killed himself, and that it was my doing. I can't bear that. Oh, they do. I've heard them. They think I'm a callous fiend who drove him mad to punish him for deserting me; who taunted and flouted him, not from any riotous virtue, but just to punish. I'm worse in their eyes than the lowest woman——!"

She moved restlessly, turned up the lamp that was burning low; and her arm glowed under the shade of it as red as blood. Then

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she sank back on her sofa. She did not mind him seeing her face ; what she wanted was to watch his.

"They all pity *her*," she said. "They listened to her hysterical version, they were gentle with her—the persecuted innocent, the poor, poor crushed little girl who was too rich, the victim of a brutal husband who had made away with himself. And now she is to marry Gay. That's all you've won by your crazy chivalry, Tokenhouse. She is to marry Gay."

"Do you mean," said Tokenhouse composedly, "that you actually think he was guilty ?"

Her hands were trembling ; she clenched them in her lap, laughing at him.

"Gay ?" she cried with scorn. "I'd as soon believe it was you ! Oh, it suited me to fight under any flag. But—I know. If Gay had shot him he would have cried it out aloud ; he's not the kind to let a friend run his risk. He would have flung the truth at them instead of stammering in the witness-box. It was not Gay you were screening."

"Who then ?" said Tokenhouse, still coolly, but not smiling.

Her bitterness was like a dammed river that, bursting, submerged all caution.

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"*She* did not care," she cried; "*she* did not come forward to speak the truth and save you. She would have let you die for her, and kept the world's pity, accepting the sacrifice——"

Tokenhouse got to his feet. His face had become white; it worked with a strange emotion.

"Sophia," he said, in a voice that was unlike his own, so quick and passionate it was, "you do not dare."

"Oh," she said, "it's always the little, cowardly, pale-mouthed women who commit the crimes."

She had launched her thunderbolt.

It was as still as death in the room, the stuffy luxurious room full of peacocks' feathers. The lamp, turned a little too high, was flaring. The smoke of it stained the ceiling. Sophia's bitter, burning eyes did not fall as she stared at the man who knew.

"You are mad," he said.

"Oh, I can't prove it," said Sophia. "Nobody can do that but you. And if I stood up and accused her I should be hounded out of society by a sympathising world. That's why I haven't—— But some day—who knows? —my turn will come. I'll always watch for

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it, Tokenhouse, though I've been a fool to-night. . . . She got the revolver from him and shot him. I can't tell how I know it; perhaps it's instinct. He belonged to me, and she stole him; and somehow I know. She killed him."

Tokenhouse controlled himself, recovering his composure and that ironic nonchalance that was a part of him. He did not sit down again, but leaned against the chimneypiece, his clean-cut features, neither young nor old, stamped with a tired indifference, reflected in the mirror; his shoulders a little bent.

"That will do, Sophia," he said. "You are not an avenging goddess, you're an implacable, noisy woman. And you can do nothing; you can't hurt her. I'll take care of that."

"Oh, you're like the rest," she said. "You fall down before her and worship her because she looks so helpless. But I wasn't deceived by your philosophy, Tokenhouse, your affectation of being a looker-on."

"I see," he said, "you will have to be told the story."

She caught her breath and stared at him for a minute, between triumph and stupefaction. After she had thwarted her plans

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by the violence of a passion she had too long suppressed, after she had betrayed herself—was he going to give her victory? She tried to understand his intention, to read that inscrutable countenance, guessing at his motive.

"You can't swear me to secrecy," she said. "I am not to be cajoled."

"Not," said Tokenhouse, "if it were a condition?"

poke carelessly, as if stopping to be amused by something so unimportant that it was scarcely worth his smile.

"We'll come to that later," he said. "So you conceive, Sophia, that I know too much? And you've been waiting for the propitious moment to make me tell. You didn't put down my queer conduct at the time to an eccentric dislike to letting myself be bullied before the crowd to save my skin? The misplaced vanity of a poor fellow who is a little touched?"

"No," she said with scorn.

"I am obliged to you for the compliment," said Tokenhouse. "You were right. I held my tongue for my own convenience. I am a bad liar. Even if you do it for others, lying is an undignified occupation. You'll call it a foolish scruple, but I couldn't stoop. And I

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should have been driven to it in cross-examination, which was unnecessary. I happened to know that you could testify to Lauder's having my revolver in his possession. He told me himself that he had taken it home and chucked it in a drawer. I was tolerably certain that I should be acquitted. In fact, my only anxiety was in case I should not be tried. It was good of you, Sophia, to keep your knowledge to yourself until the dramatic moment."

"I knew you were doing it for her," said Sophia Bland. "I knew you were screening her. If anything could frighten her into confession it should have been that. Why should I ease her conscience by showing her you were safe?"

"Ah," said Tokenhouse, and paused as she hushed her accusing voice, lusting for the revelation that was to come. "Well, you are going to hear the whole story. . . ."

She listened, avid.

"Gay heard Lauder galloping home," he said, "and got it into his head that his wife was in danger from him. He was in a fever, too headstrong to listen to argument; he made me promise to go and see. I did. I went out and came across an old vagabond

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who worked for Gay and was creeping through his fields on a poaching errand. He couldn't swear I was going to Lauder's house ; for all he knew I might have been playing game-keeper, or taking a stroll for my pleasure in the dark. He only saw me out, as he said. I went on. Mind, Sophia, I wasn't taking the thing seriously ; I was only satisfying a sick man and indulging a—whim of my own. I went on, crossed the gravel, and stood on the grass, frozen as hard as iron, outside a window that hadn't been shuttered close. I heard music."

"Go on," said Sophia Bland, leaning forward, her eyes dilated, her lips apart.

"I didn't go in—then," said Tokenhouse significantly, "but I had an idea that Gay was right and she might want protection. I didn't like the look of what I saw through that crack. I thought I had time to go back and fetch something—something that would put me on equal terms with a drunken bully. It did not take long. But I found that Gay had managed to start out himself. Perhaps he thought I had no real intention of doing what I promised to pacify him ; perhaps he forgot ; he was half delirious. Anyhow, he had disappeared while I was gone. I thought

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I must have missed him. I made the more haste back, knowing where he would try to go."

He broke off, understanding the woman's gasp.

"He never got there," he said quietly; "I've a witness to that. When I came back from Lauder's house—afterwards, I found the man from the Tin House, Johnson, supporting him. He had stumbled over him at the stile. Gay had struggled as far as that first stile, and then he had given out. I'd gone by the gate. Between us we got him in quietly and put him to bed. He'd fainted from pain in spite of his doggedness, and we made no noise. I didn't let him know there had been two of us helping him in the morning. As for Johnson, I got rid of him, muzzled him, made it worth his while to go abroad for a year——"

"Why?" asked Sophia swiftly.

Tokenhouse smiled, as if permitting himself a digression that had nothing to do with the point of his story.

"Have you ever noticed how sound carries on a still winter's night?" he said. "Out of doors, that is. The servants in that house, shut off by thick baize doors, cut off by interminable passages, heard nothing; but Johnson, out in the fields, tumbling over Gay at the

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stile, heard a pistol-crack. You'll admit, Sophia, that it was awkward for me that I should land upon him from that direction. I am a prudent man, not so quixotic as you suppose. I didn't think at the time I was injuring Gay by taking a temporary precaution. And I'm not afraid of the man blackmailing me. I'll get a signed statement from him myself for anybody who wants it—now."

"Then you were there. . . ." she said. "You saw——?"

"Yes," said Tokenhouse. "I went back and found her at the mercy of a half-drunken husband, who had taken that revolver of mine out of the drawer into which he had thrown it, and used it to frighten her. Can't you pity her now, Sophia, jeered at, insulted, in terror of her life? Not a woman like you, remember, but a girl—just a girl——"

"She murdered him," said Sophia, in a harsh whisper. Her fierce interest was crossed by a lightning flash of contempt. The patronising world had known him better than she. There must be a mental weakness in the man whose obstinate silence had now unaccountably broken down.

"She was braving him alone and defenceless," said Tokenhouse. "As I came to the

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window I heard him curse her. I told you the shutter was not secure; the bar had slipped and the sides had fallen apart. Lauder had careless servants. Standing close I could see into the room. He struck her, Sophia, kicked her falling body like the vilest brute on the earth—— The window-catch gave way at a push——”

He stopped himself. Into his voice that had vibrated to unaccustomed emotion came a sardonic calm.

“It doesn’t matter in the least what I say to you,” he observed. “I am in a position to shout it out on the housetops. There was more method in my madness, Sophia, than anybody supposed. Since I’ve been solemnly tried and acquitted according to law, no man can touch me. There’s nothing perilous in repeating what I know as openly as I choose—no occasion to let rumour poison the character of a friend. It gives one an odd sense of power, Sophia——”

“Why?” she said, holding her breath.

“Because,” said Tokenhouse, “I did it.”

